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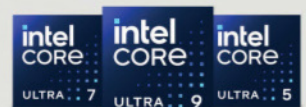


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PC GAMER

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"HAIL THE RETURN OF THE TURN-BASED STRATEGY KING"



Increasingly, I look back on the PC gaming industry in the 1990s as if it were a long-forgotten age of antiquity, one populated with heroic games, series, and devs that have since faded into legend. *Heroes of Might and Magic* was one of these legends, and it was a loss to gaming when it faded from fashion (and, arguably, quality) in the 2000s.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@RNicholasJ**This month**

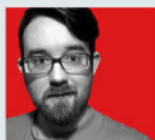
Descended into the PC Gamer Towers wyrmery and mounted Arokh, the most powerful dragon in all of gaming. Flew out for a Cheeky Nando's.

However, thanks to *Olden Era*, the thrilling new *Heroes of Might and Magic* game, this series is emerging from its legendary past with its greatness gleaming brightly. Hail the return of the high fantasy turn-based strategy king!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**FRASER BROWN**Twitter
@FraserBrown**This month**

Gunned down sub-human scum for the glory of the God-Emperor. Oh, and in *Dawn of War IV* he...

**TED LITCHFIELD**Bluesky
@dillpatrol.bsky.social**This month**

Ran a vote on 'The Ethics of Farting in Console Gamer Mouths.' All voted, resoundingly, in favour.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Bluesky
@robinvalentine**This month**

Surrounded his desk with hundreds of toy dinosaurs all called Jeff. We're getting worried.

**JC EVENDEN**Bluesky
@jevenden.wtf**This month**

Legally changed his name to JC Evenden and, since then, has always worn shades.

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Daniella Lucas grabs her shopping bag and ventures forth to find PC gaming's best, most memorable, and weirdest in-game stores. It's time to get our merch on.



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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Brave RPG devs
battle hateful retailers.

INFINITY'S END

Retailer 'advice' put an end to games like **BALDUR'S GATE**

Classic RPGs make up some of the most formative examples of late '90s to early 2000s PC gaming in my memory, but I also remember when they weirdly disappeared. If you loved games like the original *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale*, or *Planescape*, and also wondered why we stopped seeing these kinds of titles for a bit there, well it turns out you can blame physical retailers for the decline in Dungeons & Dragons-style PC RPGs.

The Infinity Engine was used to power isometric roleplaying games

such as the ones above. It allowed game devs to take many of the sentiments and mechanics used in D&D and translate them to videogame experiences. It helped a lot of people to have these kinds of adventures for the first time, especially when good Dungeon Masters are always so hard to find.

**THE INFINITY ENGINE
WAS USED TO
POWER ISOMETRIC
ROLEPLAYING GAMES**

"The reason we stopped making Infinity Engine games was because retailers told us no one wanted to buy them," says Josh Sawyer – who now serves as Obsidian's studio design director but cut his teeth working on games like *Icewind Dale* – during his keynote speech at GCAP 2025 in Melbourne, Australia. "We asked if we could see the research and they basically told us to trust them," he adds to sad chuckles from the crowd.

DIFFERENT LANDSCAPE

It seems odd for retailers, especially physical ones, to have so much power in today's world, but Sawyer explains it was a very different landscape.

ADDON-B-GONE

WOW'S SAYING GOODBYE



World of Warcraft: Midnight is officially killing the MMO's 21-year-old arms race with UI modders. Director Ion Hazzikostas tells us, "I do think that it is too hard," to hardcore raid without AddOns, and that "consequently, hardly anyone is attempting to do that". Yeah, he's got a point. ■ **HR**

RETURN TO SENDER

STEAM MESSED UP



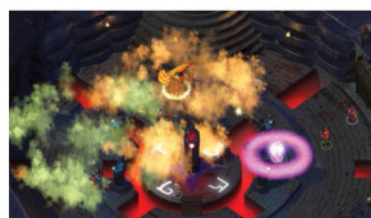
Planet Centauri was all geared up for success. With over 130,000 people wishlisting the game, developer Permadeath waited with bated breath for release day. But when that day came no one noticed, because Steam never told wishlisters – a bug that affects a small number of games. ■ **EG**

UGH

TESTING MY PATIENCE



Here's an idea to file under 'ways to ruin someone's morning'. Every day at AI company Graphite, an engineer rocks up to work to find their account deleted. This forces them to go through the same onboarding process as users in order to find and fix issues. An act known as 'dogfooding'. ■ **JR**



TOP: We never got *Planescape 2* and I've decided to blame GameStop.

ABOVE: The Infinity Engine had its charms.

Back then, retailers had a lot of power over game developers because if they wouldn't stock your game there weren't any other options.

Not only that, but storage, taking up shelf space, and displays meant retailers could be very picky about what they stocked in order to maximise profits. They'd even force companies to buy back games if they weren't selling.

BRICK AND MORTAR

With this power, brick and mortar stores were able to put the pressure on and change the landscape to suit them, not necessarily the consumers or the developers. And so, the Infinity Engine well ran dry some time in the early 2000s. It was out with the crunchy, stat-heavy RPGs of yore and in with stuff that was brighter, splashier, easier to grasp at a glance, and that looked very impressive on store shelves.

Now we have much more digital distribution, which Sawyer says gives developers of all sizes far more power and agency in the scene. While there's no guarantee you'll get sales, at the very least you can still list a game on a platform like Steam, where people have a chance of seeing and buying it without retailers having to decide they should. ■

Hope Corrigan

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Breaking the chains

Battlefield 6 dev says its destruction tech is so great because. "We're not on the PS4 or Xbox One any more."

Dwarf your-tress

Dwarf Fortress says it's "giving storytelling tools back to the people".

High wisdom

Larian boss Swen Vincke reminded execs that "making games faster and cheaper while charging more has never worked before".

Disunified

Fallout Shelter, *Pentiment* and other Unity games had to be briefly delisted on Steam thanks to a Unity security vulnerability.

Uncivil

Ubisoft reportedly cancelled an *Assassin's Creed* game set around the American Civil War.

Not gnarly

EA is charging *Skate* players \$35 for a cardboard *Dead Space* skin.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Occasionally, The Spy needs to take a moment to process what just happened. Like that time a

Tekken 8 pro lost a match because someone nearby turned on a wireless controller, or when a Russian chess player tried to poison her opponent by smearing mercury all over the board. The Spy will remember that one.

The machinations of big business are rarely as straightforward as simple murder, and the recent EA buyout has left The Spy feeling the kind of disorientation only truly enormous numbers can supply. The \$55bn mega-deal – closing in Q1 of the 2027 fiscal year – that sees EA, previously a publicly traded company for the past 36 years, taken private in the hands of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund and a private equity firm run by Donald Trump's son-in-law is a mind-bogglingly big one, but in the face of such largeness the plight of small firms must not be forgotten.

Which brings The Spy to BioWare. The Canadian developer behind *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* was bought by EA in 2007, and staff there are, according to whispers The Spy picked up during a week spent impersonating a standee of the Iron Bull in the staff canteen, not happy. The problem is twofold: BioWare has already been hit by layoffs in the wake of *Veilguard's* release and subsequent lukewarm reception, and talks have been underway to sell the studio off completely.

BEST OUTCOME

That might actually be the best outcome here, as The Spy suspects BioWare could flourish if integrated into the kind of corporate structure that left it to its own devices and didn't put the weight of too much expectation on it, or even operating as an independent entity following a management buyout. Whether those things are actually likely to happen, however, is impossible to say.

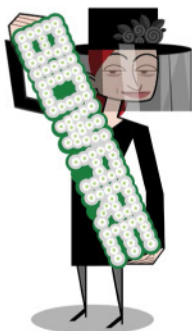
The EA deal leaves the publisher with \$20bn of debt thanks to a loan from mega-finance corp JP Morgan, and repayments are going to have to come from somewhere. The magic money tree in this case, at least as far as EA's new owners seem to believe, is AI. EA CEO Andrew

Wilson actually came out last year and said EA's developers have a "hunger" to use generative AI tools, and suggested it could be used to "build bigger, more innovative, more creative, more fun games more quickly so that we can entertain more people around the world on a global basis at a faster rate". The Spy is sceptical.

Whether this means a more efficient management of developer workloads by using AI tools to do some of the admin and release the humans to do fun creative stuff or, and let's face it this is more likely to happen, the AI being used to create art and voices, putting creators out of a job yet still managing to be worse at it than the humans it replaces, those two little letters rarely mean anything good for game dev. Vibe coding and 3D models with too many fingers aren't going to lead to good videogames.

The Spy doesn't like to end on a downer, and toyed with an amusing image of abseiling from the roof of a Riyadh tower block. Sometimes the contrivances of capitalism, and their effect on the people trying to make good games, leave little room for levity. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy also put in a bid for EA, but it was considered too dangerous.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



MATTER OF TIMING

NINTENDO's latest patent wins are a loss for everyone else

Nintendo has had a lengthy history of legal skulduggery, but after initiating last year's patent lawsuit against *Palworld* developer Pocketpair, the house of Mario has descended into outright moustache-twirling IP villainy. September, however, saw Nintendo armed with a particularly troubling weapon for its legal arsenal: US Patent 12,403,397, a patent on summoning and battling characters that the United States Patent and Trademark Office granted with alarmingly little resistance.

According to videogame patent lawyer Kirk Sigmon, the USPTO granting Nintendo these latest patents isn't just a moment of questionable legal theory. It's an indictment of American patent law. "Broadly, I don't disagree with the many online complaints about these Nintendo patents," says Sigmon, whose opinions do not represent those of his firm and clients. "They have been an embarrassing failure of the US patent system."

The '397 patent wasn't Nintendo's only success with US patent officials in September. Just one week earlier, it had been granted US Patent 12,409,387, covering riding and flying systems similar to those Nintendo has been criticised for claiming in its *Palworld* lawsuit. Sigmon, an IP attorney with extensive experience in prosecuting

and teaching patent law, says the pair of patents reflect procedural irregularities in the decision making of US patent officials. And thanks to those irregularities, Nintendo has yet more tools to bully its competitors.

The flying and riding patent, Sigmon told PC Gamer "got a bit of push-back, but barely". After its initial application was deemed invalid due to similarities to existing Tencent and Xbox-related patents, Nintendo amended its claims based on interviews with the USPTO, which then determined that the claims were allowable "for substantially the same reasons as parent application(s)". "That parent case," Sigmon says, "had an even weirder and much less useful prosecution history."

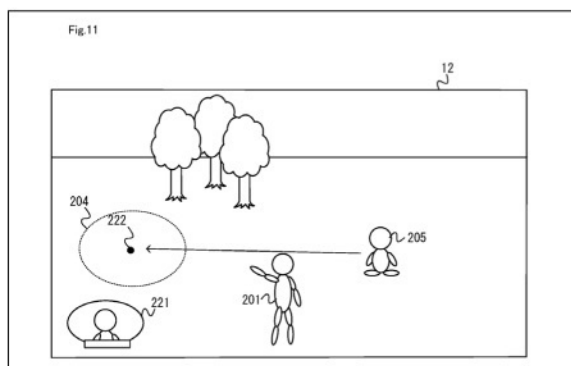
Most of the claims made in the '387 patent's single parent case, US Patent 12,246,255, were immediately allowed by the USPTO, which Sigmon says is "a very unusual result: most claims are rejected at least once". The only justification the USPTO offered was a block quote of text from the claims themselves.

To Sigmon, the '387 patent and its parent case rely on decisions that would have been obvious to a 'Person of Ordinary Skill in the Art' – a legal construct that holds if a patent's claims would reasonably occur to a practitioner in the relevant field based on prior art, those claims aren't patentable. "I strongly disagree with this result," Sigmon says. "In my view, these claims were in no way allowable."



Patent catching

When it comes to IP matters, it's worth understanding 'prior art'. For something to be patentable, it has to be novel. If you can demonstrate a patent's similarity to preexisting work, it can be rendered invalid. As a result, patent language is hyperspecific. Theoretically, something must match a patent's claims word-for-word to qualify as infringement. But a bogus lawsuit can still cost millions.



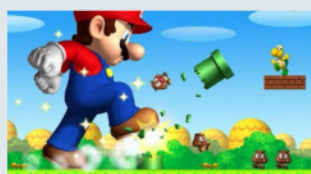
FAR LEFT: If your game looks like this, consider prayer.

LEFT: *Scarlet and Violet's* patented "sub-character" mechanics have sparked an outcry.

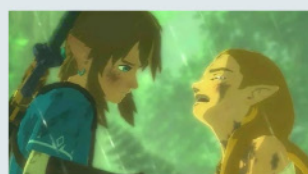
MARIO COURT *Recent highlights from Nintendo's grisly legal record.*



FEBRUARY 2022
Nintendo ROM hacker Gary Bowser is sentenced to spend three years in prison and pay a \$14.5 million fine.



MAY 2023
Nintendo prevents the Steam release of open source Wii emulator Dolphin by threatening to pursue a DMCA lawsuit.



MARCH 2024
Blamed by Nintendo for *Tears of the Kingdom* piracy, Switch emulator Yuzu agrees to pay \$2.4 million in settlement.



APRIL 2024
Garry's Mod developers are forced to purge more than 20 years of Nintendo-related creations from its workshop.

The '397 patent is even more striking. It's a patent on summoning and battling with "sub-characters" using specific language suggesting it's based on the Let's Go! mechanics in the *Pokémon Scarlet and Violet* games. Despite its relevance to a conceit in countless games – calling characters to battle enemies for you – it was allowed without any pushback whatsoever from the USPTO, which Sigmon says is essentially unheard of.

"Like the above case, the reasons for allowance don't give us even a hint of why it was allowed: the examiner just paraphrases the claims (after block quoting them) without explaining why the claims are allowed over the prior art," Sigmon says. "This is extremely unusual and raises a large number of red flags."

USPTO records show that the allowance of the '397 patent was based on a review of a relatively scant number of documents: 16 US patents, seven Japanese patents, and one article from Pokémon.com. The '397 case was originally filed as a Japanese patent application, which would allow the USPTO examiner to use the existing progress in the Japanese case as a starting point for their review. But, Sigmon says "even that doesn't excuse this quick allowance". Continuing: "This allowance should not have happened, full stop."

UNDER THREAT

On paper, the patent might not seem like a threat to Nintendo's competitors: patent claims must be met word-for-word to be infringed, and the claims as constructed in the '397 outline a specific sequence of

events. "Pragmatically speaking it's not impossible to be sued for patent infringement even when a claim infringement argument is weak, and bad patents like this cast a massive shadow on the industry," Sigmon says.

For a company at Nintendo's scale, the claims of the '397 patent don't need to be bulletproof. Just the threat of a potential lawsuit can stifle competition well enough when it would cost millions of dollars to defend against.

Sigmon, who says he's helped inventors protect their inventions from IP theft perpetrated by major companies, insists that the patent system still has merit. "That's the kind of thing that patents are meant to do," he says. "They were not made to allow a big player to game the system, get an overly broad patent that they should have never received in the first place, and then go around bullying would-be competition with the threat of a legally questionable lawsuit."

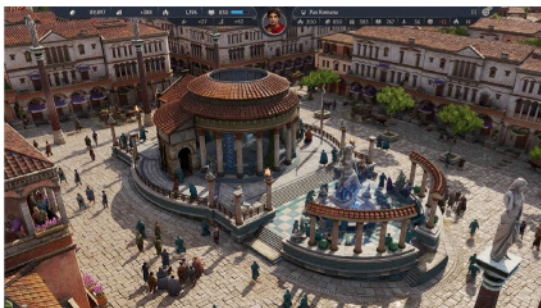
Unfortunately, Nintendo has gained these patents at a moment when the USPTO has made challenging bad patents more difficult. Currently, US patent officials under USPTO acting director Coke Morgan Stewart have been refusing to hear a huge number of Inter Partes Review cases for "discretionary" reasons.

"Realistically, this means that patent validity issues are being relegated to lawsuits: not a good situation, as that often entails millions of dollars in costs and a lot of risk," Sigmon says. "In practice, this means that bad patents get to fester on the market for longer and provide a bigger threat for the industry as a whole." ■

Lincoln Carpenter

"THIS IS EXTREMELY UNUSUAL AND RAISES A LARGE NUMBER OF RED FLAGS"

1 month



ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

RELEASE November 13, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Mainz

The latest entry in the long-running *Anno* series promises to let gamers shape the Roman Empire in their image, be that via strong economic growth or bloody warfare.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 7

RELEASE November 14, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Treyarch, Raven Software

Robots, zombies and guns, lots of guns. The latest co-op and multiplayer shooter promises to be the most mind-bending *Black Ops* ever.



YAKUZA 0 DIRECTOR'S CUT

RELEASE December 8, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

Fight through the entertainment districts of 1980s Tokyo and Osaka as yakuza Kazuma Kiryu and cabaret club manager Goro Majima. It's time to crack skulls.

2 months



CODE VEIN II

RELEASE January 29, 2026 | **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco Studios Inc.

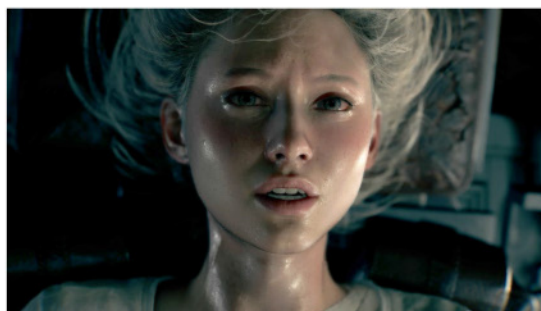
In a dystopian world overtaken by Revenants, play as a Revenant hunter who must travel into the past with a mysterious girl called Lou in order to save the planet.



DEUS EX REMASTERED

RELEASE February 5, 2026 | **DEVELOPER** Aspyr

The legendary cyberpunk immersive sim is back, with this new remaster promising visual upgrades, quality-of-life improvements and all-new animations.

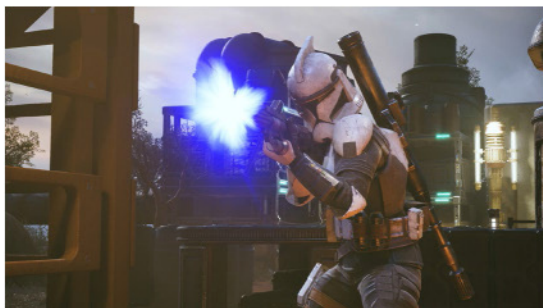


RESIDENT EVIL REQUIEM

RELEASE February 27, 2026 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

Return once more to Raccoon City, the home of the mysterious Umbrella pharmaceutical company, as Grace Ashcroft, an intelligence analyst for the FBI.

3 months



STAR WARS ZERO COMPANYY

RELEASE TBC | DEVELOPER Bit Reactor

What happens if you take the turn-based combat system from *XCOM* and smash it together with the Star Wars universe? *Zero Company* is what happens.



007 FIRST LIGHT

RELEASE 27 March, 2026 | DEVELOPER IO Interactive

Step into the shoes of James Bond before he attained his 00 status. From the makers of *Hitman*, this third-person action-adventure game promises espionage and quips.



ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Capcom

Wield a variety of deadly weapons as famous sword master Miyamoto Musashi. Incredibly visceral and kinetic combat is promised as Musashi fights through Edo-era Kyoto.

4 months+



SUBNAUTICA 2

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Unknown Worlds Entertainment

An open-water survival game in which you must craft vehicles, tools and bases to survive on a mysterious alien world. This is looking like a total treat.



FABLE

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Playground Games

A reboot of the old action-RPG series originally crafted by Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios, *Fable* promises a visually spectacular return to the fantasy world of Albion.



ATOMIC HEART 2

RELEASE TBC | DEVELOPER Mundfish

The bonkers Soviet Union-themed *BioShock*-like returns for more violence. If you're a sucker for dystopia and retrofuturism then this is one to keep an eye on.

MOD

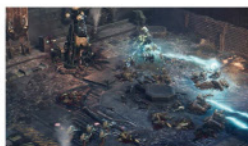
EYE-SHADOWHEART

Posho goth girl Shadowheart was illustrated originally with some pretty epic eyeshadow and face tattoos, which didn't then make it into her final design. However, if you want to reinstate the daughter of darkness's original look, then now you can, thanks to the *Shadowheart Concept Art Face Tattoos* mod. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/76e97vka





Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War IV



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
King Art GamesPUBLISHER
Deep SilverLINK
steam.pm/app/2272360WARHAMMER 40K:
DAWN OF WAR IVKing Art wants to bring back
what made the first game special

A horde of howling orks comes charging across the war-torn wasteland, straight towards the men and women of the Astra Militarum, waiting with guns primed, hiding behind walls, readying themselves for death. Then angels fall from the heavens; heavily armoured saviours in drop pods that slam to the ground and annihilate any orks unlucky enough to be standing underneath them. The Blood Ravens are here. And they are going to fuck shit up.

Oh, boy. *Dawn of War IV*. Yes, it's back. And I do really mean back. If, like me, you've been praying to the God Emperor that one day we'd get a true sequel to the original *Dawn of War*, then I've got good news: the horrible, desiccated, throne-bound corpse was listening.

OK, OK, I don't want to get too ahead of myself. I have played one skirmish map (multiple times) of a pre-alpha build that's full of placeholder assets and wonky performance. But even this early, there are reasons to be excited.

The Blood Ravens are back, joined by orks, Necrons and the boffins of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Each army will have its own dynamic story-driven campaign, too. A wargear system will also let you tailor units for different engagements. Expect different types of missions as well, but with returning features like proper base building, capture points and a basic cover system. Meanwhile, multiplayer modes – including Last Stand – will be available, but the singleplayer campaigns are the focus. And lastly, sync kills have

been expanded, so troops fighting each other in melee will sync up to do more elaborate hand-to-hand duels.

So yeah! I am pumped for this. King Art feels like a really good fit. *Iron Harvest* is one of the best modern RTS romps, and it generated a lot of comparisons with not just Relic's design philosophy, but specific games like *Company of Heroes* and *Dawn of War*. If I was going to pick a new studio to take on *Dawn of War*, King Art would be at the top of the list.

RETURN TO KRONOS

The skirmish I played was designed specifically to show the game off; it's not one that you'll see at launch. Still, it reflects the kinds of skirmish mission types that you'll see in the campaign: a mix of sandbox conquest, scripted surprises and over-the-top story beats.

Once the Blood Ravens drop into the battlefield, I'm encouraged to start building my base, before expanding across the map by capturing locations that generate resources, which I'll then spend on research, new units and reinforcing squads that have taken a beating. These resource points can be upgraded, and protected by surrounding them with turrets that are surprisingly efficient at depriving foes of their limbs and guts.

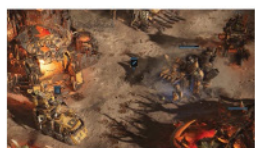
Just to be on the safe side, I stick some Blood Raven Intercessors behind some barricades too. The cover system is a simple one where you just click on the barricade and your troops line up behind it. You won't see any green and yellow dots denoting who is in full cover and who is still a bit vulnerable – units are either protected or they aren't. I miss the complexity of the series' original cover system, but the lack of faff is appreciated.

While I'm doing this, the orks are busy. Along with trying to capture these same points and constantly harassing me, they're slowly constructing some more intimidating units – Gorkanauts – at two outposts, as well as keeping my Astra Militarum buddies locked down.

This gives me some optional objectives: destroy the outposts, and take the heat off the Astra Militarum. Ticking the latter off the list means my brave (but considerably more mortal) allies can start sending units into the fray – including a

PLAYED
ITTHE BLOOD RAVENS ARE BACK,
JOINED BY ORKS, NECRONS
AND ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War IV



➤ gargantuan Knight – giving me an advantage when I tackle the orks' base.

While I'm working towards these goals, the Necrons attack. Teleporting into a battle that's already underway, they start slaughtering orks and chipping away at my Blood Raven squads. It's a three-way clusterfuck filling the screen with bullets, lasers, explosions and bisected corpses.

Confidence bolstered by defeating the Necrons, I push further into ork territory, with an army that now contains Intercessors with jump packs, Bladeguard Veterans, multiple Terminator squads, Redemptor Dreadnoughts, Reaper Executioners – I'm in heaven. The enemy AI is single-minded and relentless, and while it manages to catch me out with a sneaky flanking assault, it's not enough to hold back my Blood Raven army. I push them back to the top corner of the map and keep them there while I build as many Dreadnoughts as I can. Just for fun.

The battle ends in fire. Orbital strikes decimate the ork buildings, while my Dreadnoughts tear into the enemy force, smashing any ork that gets close while spitting flames at the rest.

KILLER QUARTET

Let's dig into the rest of the factions. Blood Raven Space Marines are, you'll be pleased to know, tough as hell. The speed with which *Dawn of War III*'s units could be downed was a bit of a sore point, but that is thankfully not an issue here. They might not be at the power level of a Space Marine from a Black Library novel, or Titus and pals in *Space Marine 2*, but they can handle a lot. They feel indomitable.

Blood Raven units can be kept in reserve, so you can deploy them where they're most needed – just like the tabletop game. You can fling them into action via drop pods, and you can even move existing units around the battlefield in Thunderhawk flying transports.

Orks use overwhelming numbers and lax building codes to get an edge, covering the map in ramshackle buildings and boisterous warriors itching for a fight. They are comparatively squishier than the Imperium's elite, but they make up for their fleshiness with an unquenchable enthusiasm for violence and conquest.

BLOOD RAVEN SPACE MARINES ARE, YOU'LL BE PLEASED TO KNOW, TOUGH AS HELL

And they can quickly establish a foothold, plonking down fortifications and bringing in new units with alarming alacrity.

With their beefy mechs, like the imposing Gorkanaut, and vehicles like the Battlewagon, the orks have no dearth of tanky machines. These things can be squad-killers. But orks don't need heavy metal to be a nuisance. They can also get hyped up into a psychic rage (a WAAAGH!) by destroying buildings and units, which in turn unlocks new stratagems to make them even more effective killing machines.

Finally, we've got the Necrons. I only got to see a glimpse of them in the demo, but oh boy, what an introduction, just dropping in and wrecking everything. Necron armies are slow on foot, but can use teleportation technology to give you an unpleasant jump scare. Units also regenerate health, and there's a building that can resurrect units for free. Classic undying machine nonsense.

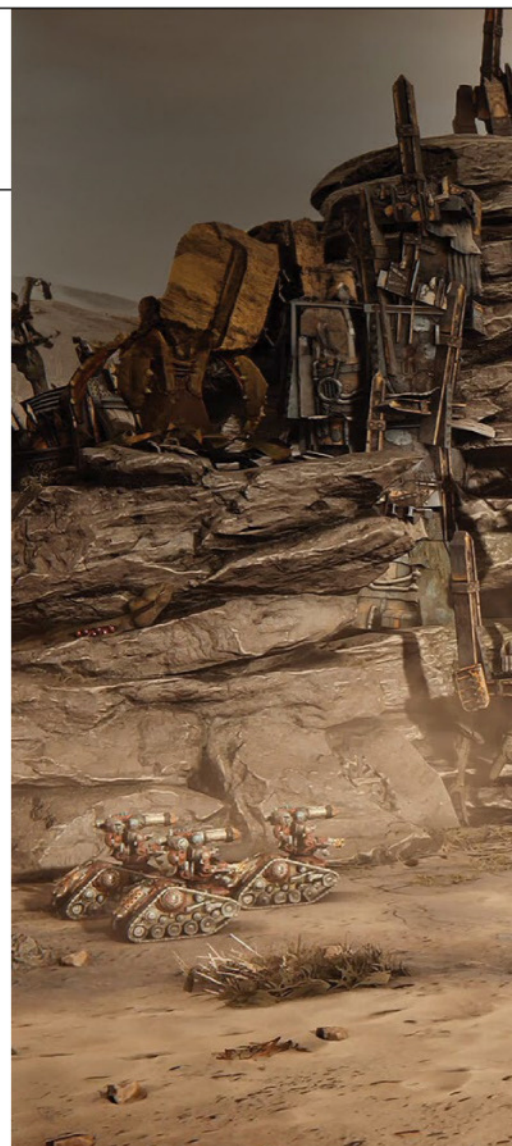
BLOODTHIRSTY

Dawn of War IV is certainly ticking all the right grimdark boxes. One skirmish isn't a very robust dataset, but it was an extremely fun skirmish. The fights look ridiculous and sound bombastic, the Space Marine attacks are blessed with incredible weight, emphasising how terrifyingly strong they are, and the range of tactical options is impressive – the units and upgrades give you plenty of ways to get out of or into a sticky situation.

The pace feels right, too, though it's a lot faster than the previous games (and obviously the tabletop version). You can get a full base up and running in minutes, and units are recruited pretty swiftly. Fights, meanwhile, tend to go on for just long enough so that you can zoom in and admire the spectacle, while dishing out orders and activating abilities, but the victor of each confrontation is crowned in a timeframe measured in seconds.

For a game this brisk, the balance between micro and macro was on the money, though the swiftness of battles has necessitated the removal of some features from the previous games, like using craters for cover or using suppressive fire. *Dawn of War IV* wants you to jump into the fray as quickly as possible. The history of the series has made me a bit cautious, but *Dawn of War IV*'s demo has got my blood pumping. If it sticks the landing, I can absolutely see this living up to the legacy of the first game.

Fraser Brown



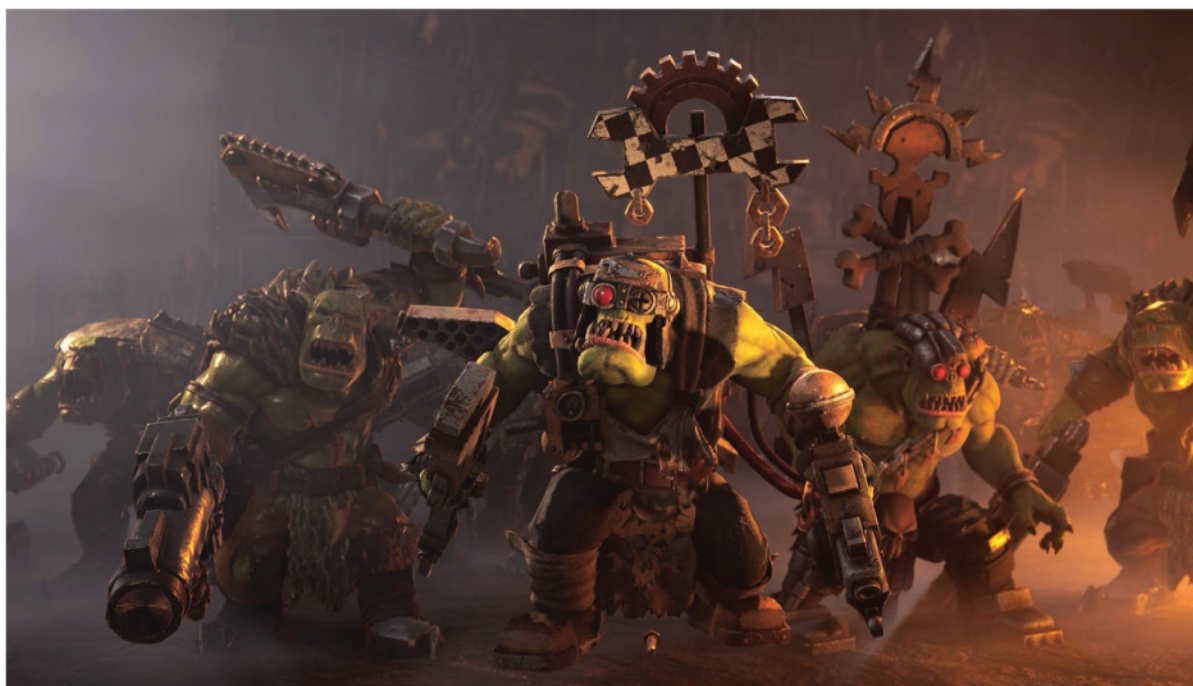
Fights sound very bombastic, just as they should do.

Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War IV



ABOVE: "Hello chaps, I'm a dreadnought, and today I'll be your explodey death."

LEFT: How did this photograph of console gamers get in here?



Deus Ex Remastered

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 5, 2026

DEVELOPER
Aspyr Media

PUBLISHER
Aspyr Media

LINK
steam.pm/app/3131640

DEUS EX
REMASTERED

JC's original jaunt
receives augmentations

First things first: it's not Nightdive. The remaster specialists behind the *System Shock 2* and *Heretic + Hexen* re-releases wanted to do *Deus Ex*, and said so back in 2024, but Aspyr (of the *Tomb Raider* remakes) has been given the gig instead. This isn't the only thing that's annoyed a portion of the fanbase.

Early screenshots look... not great. The original *Deus Ex*, from 2000, was built on the first Unreal engine and required just 16MB of VRAM to run. As such, it always looked a little boxy, it being the year of the PlayStation 2's release, along with the first *Hitman* and *Thief II*.

There is, therefore, a lot of graphical ground to make up with a remaster. Whether it takes the *Oblivion* route, and runs the original game in an Unreal Engine 5 wrapper, or uses the Nightdive method of a source port to a proprietary engine, what we've come to expect are upgraded models and textures, even if the level geometry stays the same, as well as modern conveniences such as ultrawide support, gamepads, and the ability to Alt+Tab out without the whole thing throwing a fit.

Will we get them? At the moment, it's impossible to say, though there's no reason to think Aspyr won't do a cracking job. All the negativity toward the remaster so far is based on the screenshots, which are an improvement over the original's

looks in some ways, and yet the smooth faces and shiny uniforms make it look more like its own sequel *Invisible War* than *Mankind Divided*. Every shot released so far is extremely dark – which isn't inauthentic to the original, it was always going for a moody and atmospheric look – but makes it hard to pick out what improvements have been made. There are apparently dynamic shadows, particle systems, upscaled textures and lip-synced dialogue here, but they're kind of hard to see. Will a toggle to play with the original graphics be included, just as Aspyr did in its *Tomb Raider* and *Legacy of Kain* remasters? We can only hope.

SKIN DEEP

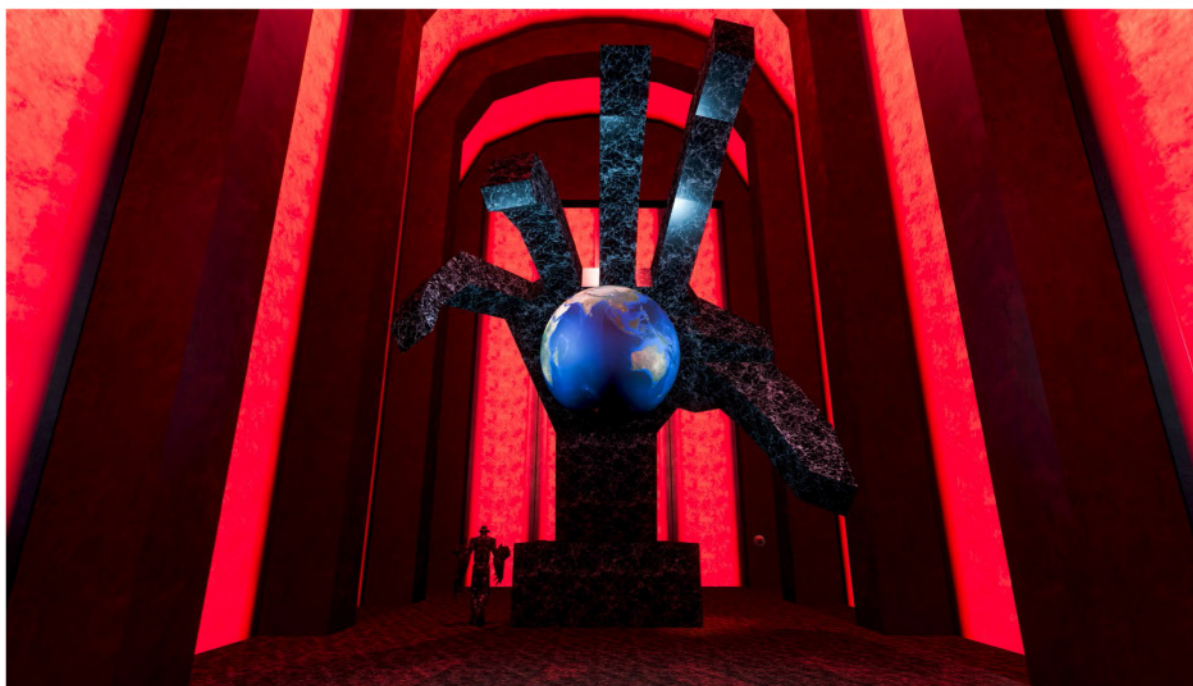
There's a lot more to *Deus Ex* than its graphics, however, and if there ever was a game ripe for a remaster in 2025, this is it. Would you rather be free but live in a world of chaos, or be safe in a society that's ordered but oppressed? As an immersive sim, it features a mesh of interlocking systems that means every playthrough can be completely different.

This is the part of *Deus Ex* a remaster shouldn't change, and there will be rioting in the streets if Aspyr starts fiddling with the way the game works beyond patching up some of the more obviously broken quest items or incomplete dialogue trees. Its clunky cyberpunk plot looks even more clichéd in 2025 than it did in 2000, but still has the ability to draw you in as it twists and turns.

It's worth remembering that Embracer, which owns Aspyr and Eidos Montreal, cancelled a new *Deus Ex* project at the latter developer last year, at the cost of 97 jobs. With two years of work down the drain on that title, a remaster of the original won't go very far toward making up for what could have been. Playing *Deus Ex* again is always worth it, but there are already plenty of ways to play the game on PC – it's £6 at most on GOG and you can add the community-built overhaul mod Revision for free – that this remaster begins to look less like the return of a lost classic for PC and more of a way to get the game onto consoles. At least this means the console gamers have a treat coming their way.

Ian Evenden

ITS CLUNKY CYBERPUNK
PLOT LOOKS EVEN MORE
CLICHÉD IN 2025



ABOVE: This scene from the trailer has some shiny lighting, but is still a corridor.

LEFT: No organisation with a logo like this could be anything other than benign.

Jurassic World Evolution 3

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
Frontier Developments

LINK
steam.pm/app/2958130

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION 3

More park customisation, less dinosaur-driven chaos

Jurassic Park is about chaos. Man comes to think he can control nature, even play God, and he is undone by his hubris. Dinosaurs run amok and destroy all he has built. Life finds a way. *Jurassic World Evolution 3* is not about that.

Ten minutes into my roughly hour-and-a-half playing *Jurassic World Evolution 3* at a recent preview event, I find myself agonising over which of the 17 different possible designs of path I should lay down in front of my maintenance building. Each one has a fully customisable colour scheme. More than ever, this is a series about control.

CAGED BEAUTY

In that sense, this sequel feels aimed squarely at existing fans. The core loop is familiar to the point of, frankly, staleness – build enclosures, put dinosaurs in them, add and remove things until the dinosaurs are happy, plonk down supporting buildings around them, repeat. Instead of shaking up the formula, what this sequel adds are more tools for refining,



PLAYED IT

beautifying and perfecting your park to your exact preferences.

Buildings can be customised with a huge array of modular parts. The environment can be sculpted and shaped more elaborately than ever before. Almost everything can be recoloured, scaled, and rotated.

"We wanted to make it more flexible, more creative, and give players the chance to share their creations," says Andy Fletcher, game director on the project. "We had great experiences doing that with some of our other games, and we knew Jurassic fans would take to that if we did it right. So we really wanted to bring that level of granular creativity to the game."

Planet Coaster and *Planet Zoo* fans will already be familiar with the Frontier Workshop, a platform that allows players to share their creations. Here, you'll be able to upload and download everything from full park maps to grouped scenery layouts to individual buildings. For dedicated digital architects, it's a really exciting addition.

But the more I searched for a frisson of danger in the game, the more I discovered how far this feeling of absolute control extends. Hammond's hubristic experiment feels entirely in hand, with new building types offering more ways to contain disasters and preserve the sanctity of your creations.

BUZZ AROUND

"This time what we've tried to do is give you more tools, so that if you do want a more well managed park, a more secure, kind of sedate experience if you like, we're giving you more tools to achieve that," says Fletcher. "So you've got these new maintenance posts that allow maintenance teams to basically buzz around and fix fences as soon as they're [broken]. We've got security cameras that allow your capture teams to automatically identify and capture a dinosaur that might be loose in the guest area. We want to offer up these options so players don't always have to feel like they need to attend emergencies all the time. You can kind of preempt it and

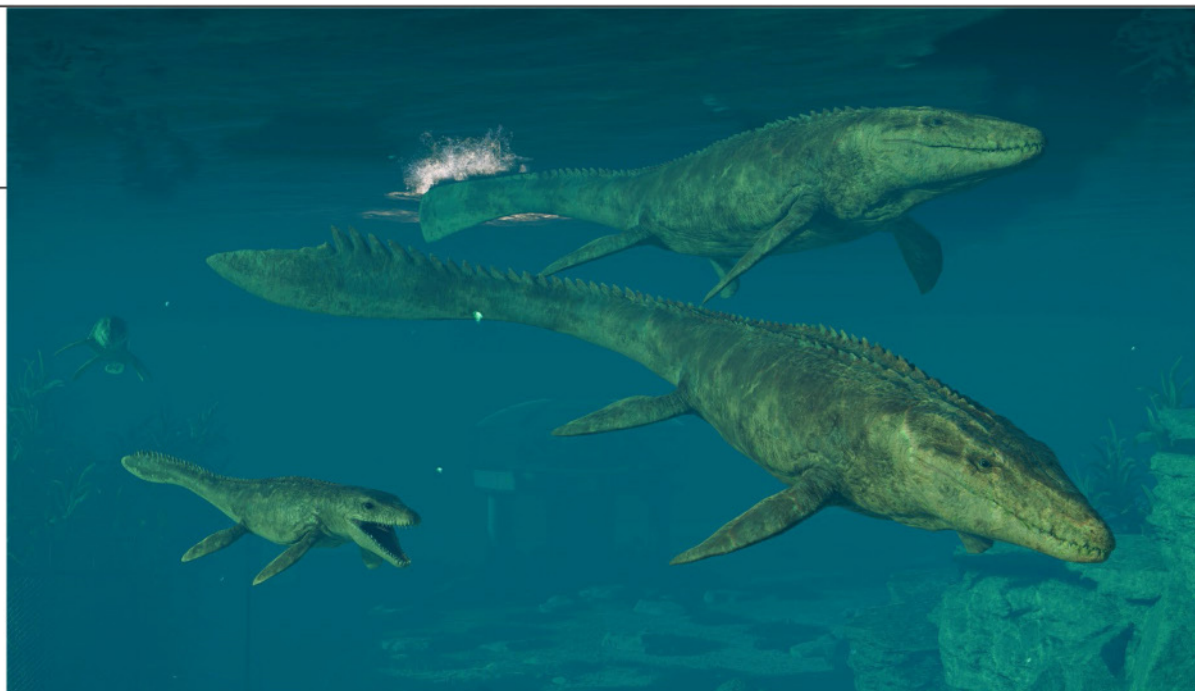
"PLAYERS DON'T HAVE TO FEEL LIKE THEY NEED TO ATTEND EMERGENCIES ALL THE TIME"



Gamers will be able to share their dinosaur park creations via the Frontier Workshop.

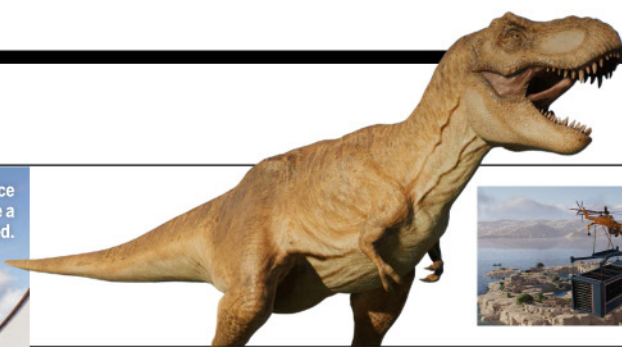
RIGHT: Defo wouldn't want to go swimming these chaps.

BELOW: You can hear the Jurassic Park theme tune when you look at this screenshot, can't you?





That sure looks like a nice dinosaur park. Would be a shame if chaos ensued.



👉 make it all run like clockwork if you want to put the time in to do that.”

NEST PRACTICE

The big development this time for the dinosaurs themselves is the addition of a more natural lifecycle. Male dinosaurs can now be introduced to your park, and you can encourage natural breeding, resulting in... adorable baby dinosaurs!

Gorgeous animation has always been a strong suit of the series, and these little guys are lovely to watch as they trot around their enclosures. You can even arrange petting zoo-style experiences, allowing visitors to interact with the more docile juvenile herbivores. The *Jurassic World Evolution* games can feel a little sterile at times, to me – baby dinosaurs add a welcome bit of warmth.

“I think there is a slight shift in tone in terms of being a little bit more about the conservation of these dinosaurs across the globe and encouraging breeding out in the wild,” says Fletcher. “So it’s a good balance of that sort of hard science and synthesis of before, and something a bit more naturalistic.”

But though this system adds more life to your enclosures, it still all feels very contained. You decide exactly when and where dinosaurs breed, by controlling their happiness levels and manually placing their nests.

You can choose exactly who mates with who, customising family trees to pass down particular genetic traits from behavioural quirks like being nocturnal to colour and patterning. And if anything doesn’t go exactly as you prefer, or you need to expand your gene pool, you’re free to do things the, uh, new-fashioned way instead, synthesising dinosaurs from scratch in your lab.

The babies are cute but they are, ultimately, just another little set of numbers to tweak – they rate particularly well on the ‘appeal’ stat, of course, delighting visitors – rather than feeling like living, wilful beings.

In the original movie, Hammond made all the dinosaurs female to try and avoid losing control of the population. There’s no fear of that here. Dino mothers don’t become any more

dangerous or difficult to contain, nor do amorous males. Nature is fully controlled – and you can mould it to your liking. Life does not find a way.

CORPORATE TOOL

Combined with the scientifically-minded and very earnest tone of the game – the (literally) biting corporate satire that pervades the movies is extremely thin on the ground here – for me all this perfect order makes for a somewhat dry experience. Eventually I give up on finding the excitement in a normally functioning park, and invite the chaos in directly – first introducing multiple apex predator species into the same enclosure, and then in desperation simply deleting gates to let the dinosaurs run free.

But what I’m looking for simply isn’t there. The resulting war between snapping utahraptors and fierce yutyrannus has no real tension – every now and then a fight breaks out, always one-on-one like an honourable duel, and they bite at each other for a bit before one falls over and the game tells me to deal with the corpse.

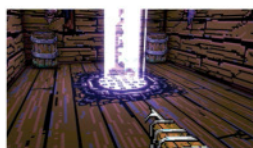
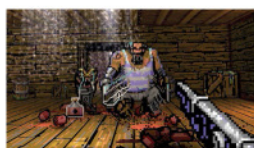
CORPORATE TOOL

When I let a hulking acrocanthosaurus loose on the grounds, visitors hardly seem bothered to get up from their chairs at the restaurant, and it doesn’t even have the good grace to savage anyone. It simply wanders listlessly, waiting to be recaptured. Leaving the situation completely out of control for about 15 minutes results in no lasting damage, no bite marks in my buildings, and as far as I can make out not a single death. Getting everything back to normal is a matter of a few clicks.

But of course that’s how it goes. *Jurassic World Evolution 3* is about supporting your grand design, not destroying it. Though I fear the dinosaurs themselves have become simply set dressing, the result is a really impressive tool for those who love to intricately piece together what they see in their mind on screen – or dive into a whole library of other people’s amazing creations – without being overwhelmed by crises or stymied by more organic systems. This isn’t shaping up to be a thrilling sequel, but it is a confident one, committing to its core audience more than ever. I tell you what: John Hammond would love it.

Robin Valentine

**NATURE IS FULLY CONTROLLED
– AND YOU CAN MOULD IT
TO YOUR LIKING**

Project Warlock: Lost Chapters

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Buckshot Software

PUBLISHER
Retrovibe

LINK
steam.pm/app/1043850

PROJECT WARLOCK:
LOST CHAPTERS

This boomer shooter-style FPS dials the madness up to 11

I awake aboard a rocking ship, which is rolling among the ocean waves. Outside my cabin's window, unspeakable eldritch horrors await, with tentacles writhing within the deep waters. But in my hand a razor-sharp sabre is lodged, at my feet a rifle rests, and in my mind are the words of power needed to summon terrible, destructive magics. This is the mad new entry in the *Project Warlock* series of games, *Lost Chapters*, and the terror and treasure hunting is about to begin.

I kick down the door of my cabin, and I am immediately confronted by gun-toting pirates and slithery demonic monstrosities. Why the denizens of the *Dungeon Dimensions* and the pirates are in cahoots is anyone's guess, but they surge at me like a console gamer trying to pick up the latest underpowered console, all slobber and tongues. I split the beasts in twain with my sabre before switching to the rifle and putting bullets alongside the one good eye of each pirate, their heads exploding.

I ransack various rooms within the ship, swagging a non-stop bounty of treasure, potions and, naturally, keys. I use the keys to open locked doors, before then bursting through them to wreak more havoc. A blunderbuss is soon acquired, acting as a close-quarters shotgun-style pulveriser, and each of its discharges leaves a pile of exploded gore in its wake. Abominations, seemingly made of naught

but slime and teeth, lunge at me at terrifying speed. If I'm not careful, they can quickly chomp through my health gauge, but as long as I keep moving at all times while in combat, as typical of this sort of retro boomer shooter-style FPS, it's easy enough to come out victorious.

DARK MAGICS

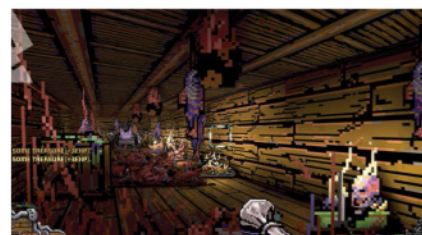
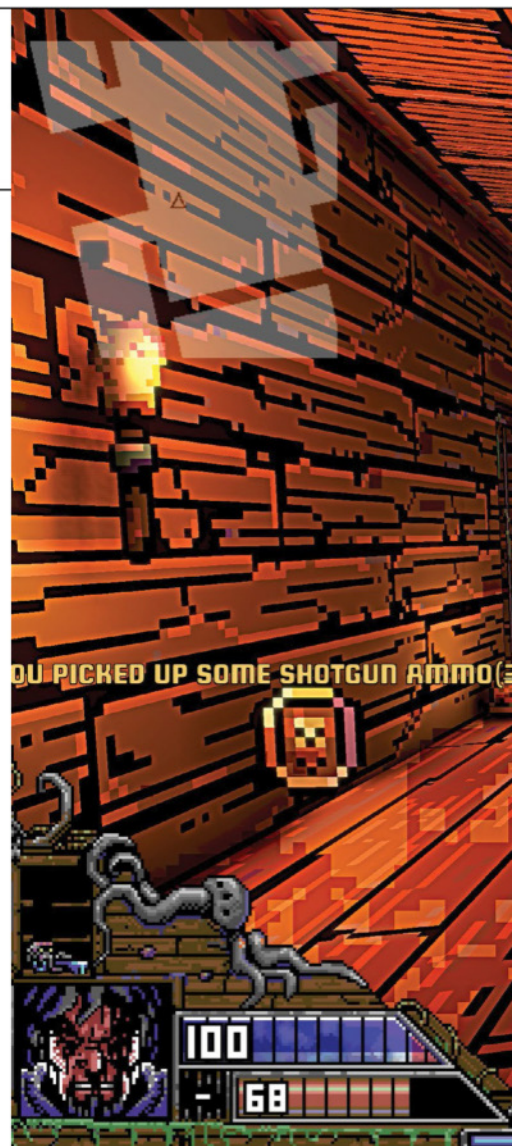
Certain areas of the ship's main deck and hold, though, are teeming with foes, and for these I need to call upon my mastery of dark magics, which are deliverable via a dedicated mana gauge. At first, I manifest flames within my fingers, crafting them into a burning orb, before projecting it at my enemies. They burn and scream as the sparks fly. But when I find myself being preyed upon by snakemen, crabs, demonic slugs, flesh abominations and pirates all at once, I need to call upon an even deadlier piece of sorcery. I summon a spectral blade that severs the life force of all in proximity, my rivals dropping dead in a blinding flash of white light.

More treasure awaits, which is loaded into every part of the ship. Sometimes it is even stashed in hidden secret

compartments, which are spottable to the keen-eyed. All sorts of extra pick-ups, including upgrade points, are also pocketed. However, in the restricted limits of this small-scale sample adventure, none are actually of much use. Nevertheless, I plunder on, even stepping through a portal that hints at the full adventure's wider-reaching scope, and soon I am faced with a shrine that demands I offer a blood sacrifice for me to progress. I approach the altar, slit my hand with my blade, and drizzle my blood over it. This finishes my time on this ship, and indeed, playing the demo of *Project Warlock: Lost Chapters*.

The full game, which at the time of writing doesn't have a release date, promises far more of this first-person shooting, slashing, and spell-casting action, with the titular Warlock fighting his way through pirate, space, and Vietnam-themed realms to rid them of evil as well as, presumably, trouser as much treasure as possible. It's quite frankly bonkers, but the core gunplay is good and the pixel art dripping with character. A playable demo is available now on Steam.

Robert Jones



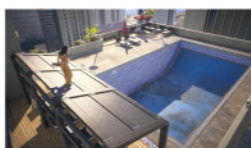
**I SPLIT THE BEASTS IN TWAIN
WITH MY SABRE BEFORE
SWITCHING TO THE RIFLE**



ABOVE: The ship is awash with pirates, monsters and, naturally, treasure.

LEFT: The toothy, fleshy abominations move faster than you think they would.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Full Circle

PUBLISHER

EA

LINK

steam.pm/app/3354750

SKATE

This skating game is far from perfect, but it's got potential

As I lie face down on the cold, hard concrete of the skate park, I take a deep breath and confirm that, yes, I've definitely won the Best Dressed Corpse Award. My huge 720-degree Christ Air looked incredible as I, the flying Jesus of skateboarding, pirouetted through the skies of San Vansterdam, *Skate's* fictional city. But I got greedy like the dwarves of Moria and, stretching for just a little bit more rotation, failed to get my skateboard fully back under my feet in time. The rest, as the grinders say, is skating history.

So far, this has largely summed up my time with the return of the *Skate* series, which, after a long hiatus, has relaunched into this free-to-play Early Access game. There's been plenty of pleasure, with the skating game becoming my new go-to for a short gaming session to unwind. But there's also been plenty of pain, with some frustrating design decisions on behalf of the game's developers, Full Circle, leaving me both scratching my head and raging against the corporately cloying skating machine you can suddenly find yourself in.

OK, let's talk about the good stuff, which pleasingly starts with some smart and slick skating mechanics. The majority of tricks and moves are pulled off through the game's stick-flicking system. Make a few right-stick flicks, either singular or in a sequence, and your skater will instantly pull off some sweet skating tricks, ranging from varial kickflips and pop-shuvits, to laserflips, nollies and tic tacs.

TRICKS AND MOVES ARE PULLED OFF THROUGH THE STICK-FLICKING SYSTEM

Combine these right-stick flicks with inputs on the left stick, as well as presses from both shoulder triggers and face buttons, and your virtual skateboarder can perform all sorts of skating madness, from 360 spins and overhead rotations, to extreme one- or no-foot board grabs. The stick-flicking system also extends to launching yourself into the air for jumps, as well as for positioning yourself for grinds on rails and ledges, with the orientation of the stick determining your entry and exit of grind, as well as type.

Simply put, the system works very well. It's simple enough that within five minutes of playing *Skate* you'll be performing some cool tricks, but it is also deep enough in combination with the game's other controls that a huge swathe of moves can be tapped into if you have the skill and timing to pull them off. It's easy, for example, to pull off a 180 or 360-degree modified grab. There's no huge barrier to entry, and that comes from a middle-aged guy who last played a skating game during the original days of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* games of the late '90s and early 2000s.

PLAYED IT

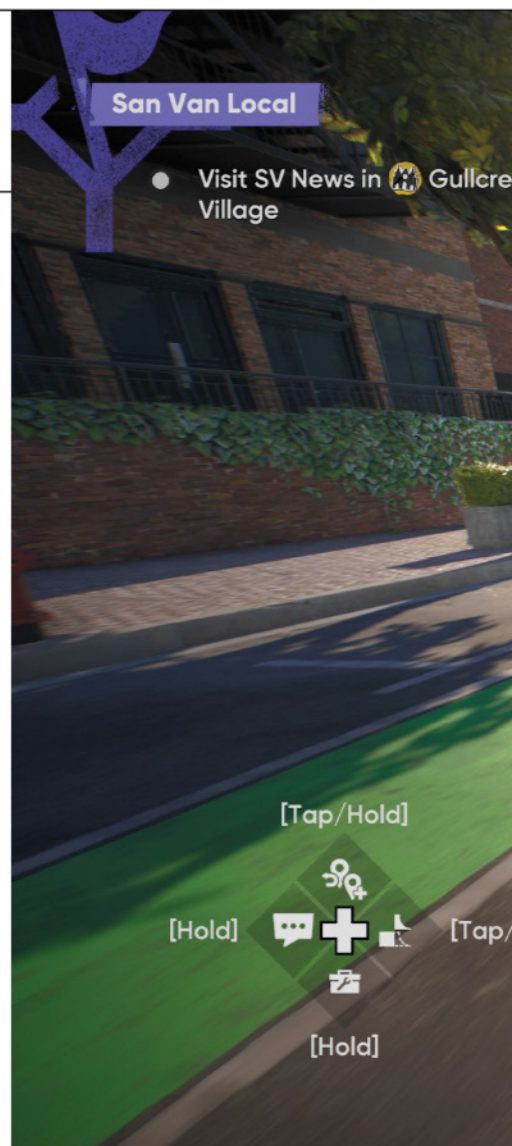
SAN VAN DISCO

What's also good is this new *Skate's* fictional location of San Vansterdam, a Scandi-American city hybrid that is obsessed with skating. It's sunny and bright, clean and loaded with music, with every location awash with chill vibes. The city has a welcoming character that is pleasant to return to each day.

As you skate around San Van, you can control the beats, too, either directly selecting tracks from the UI or by taking over specific speakers at locations. So if you like to grind down by the sea in a specific spot, then you can tune into the music playing there or select your own. But if the underground skate park is more your thing then you can bust moves to your tunes there instead.

TICKET TO GRIND

Progress in *Skate* comes by attempting challenges in the city, which are peppered around the open-world map. Roll up to a challenge and accept it, and you're presented with a series of goals to achieve within the overall challenge, each of which awards you with 'rip chips' to spend on





ABOVE: I travel to PC Gamer Towers like this every single day. Fact.

LEFT: San Vansterdam has numerous huge skate parks to enjoy.

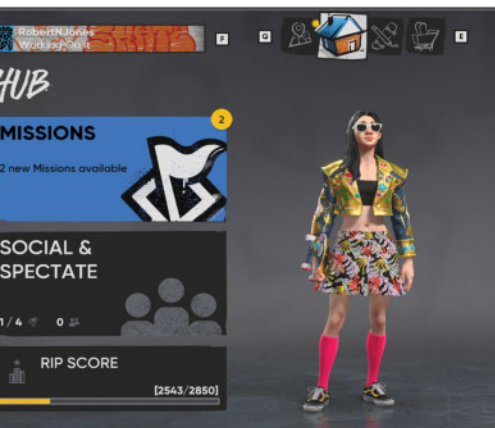
PREVIEW

Skate

RIGHT: Session challenges are broken down into a series of goals.

BELOW: Needless to say, I didn't quite land this one.





opening product (loot) boxes in the city's various stores. Completing challenges also earns you 'rip score' points that raise your reputation in that area of the city, with each level of reputation increase unlocking more challenges, fast travel points and, yes, more rip chips.

The result is a core gameplay loop where you log in to do some skating, take on a series of challenges, which are graded in terms of difficulty, complete some or all of the challenge goals, before then using your newly earned reputation score to open new areas of San Van as well as more challenges to complete.

What's also good is that you don't have to complete all the goals in any specific challenge to cash out on the goals you have completed. So if you've completed four out of five goals, but are banging your head against the wall (literally) on the fifth, then you can end the challenge and take your rewards for the other completed goals. I'd say that 80% of the time I pretty quickly completed all goals, but I have made use of the cash out feature on a few challenges where I got frustrated.

CORPO CORE

Where *Skate* falls down right now is in its corporate hand-holding, with it coming across most of the time as a game built by people who think they are successfully imitating skate culture in a way that will appeal to skaters, but actually missing the point entirely. After being dropped into the world of *Skate*, you'll then proceed to be talked at, almost nonstop, by an AI-generated character called Vee. Vee is intrusive to the extreme, bombarding you with dialogue that is overwhelming and seems intended to appeal to ten-year-olds. I'm sure most adults, like me, let alone actual skateboarders, will feel how tonally off Vee is.

What's worse is that Vee is baked into the game's very lengthy tutorial, which will see you skating around San Van for hours while Vee chips in constantly, like an annoying AI spectre at the skating feast. Vee is your entry and guide into the world of this new free-to-play *Skate*, and the feeling Vee communicates is that it is corporate and fake. There's no edge, no bite and, sadly, no reality. You can limit the

amount Vee will interject in the game's menu settings, sure, but not silence her completely, and that sums up the overbearing feeling the game has if you play it for too long. There's only so long you can listen to badly written, *Forza Horizon*-style chirpy, committee-decided, sterile nonsense, both from Vee and from the game's other cast of commentators, before you start to lose the plot.

Where this new *Skate* also drips from cringey corpo is in its 'stunting' gameplay, which basically sees you just throw yourself off tall buildings and smash your ragdolling character into things like bins, vents, trees and monuments. And, to be clear, this is built into the core of the game. It's treated as so much more than a side show. There are literally tutorials and challenges where you have to do this and, honestly, it's just total crap and incredibly gimmicky. It's fun, maybe, once. Then every time after that it is a chore that takes you away from actually skating. I've come here to skate, not to throw myself off a skyscraper into a dinosaur statue's bottom. It's the most transparent attempt to make the game virally clippable on social media to idiots that I've ever seen.

TIME TO BAIL

Finally, as you would expect for a free-to-play game, *Skate* also has its paid-for with real money in-game currency of San Van Bucks. These let you purchase unique cosmetics for your character, as well as a variety of other cool gear and equipment. If you buy Founder's Pack, then you get a bunch of San Van Bucks out of the gate to spend, but otherwise you have to buy tranches of them in-game. Being candid, I have absolutely zero problem with this. From the 11 hours I've spent playing *Skate*, there has been zero requirement or pressure to spend any real money in the game, and you can unlock plenty of cosmetics and items simply by completing challenges.

Overall, then, I feel there is a good skating game hidden in *Skate*, but right now it is smothered by its off tone, cloying hand-holding, and misguided focus on gimmicky gameplay. Despite not being a serious skating game, or one that currently matches the authenticity of the earlier games in the *Skate* series, the skating fundamentals are good here and could help build a lasting in-game community. But only if the devs realise that they just need to let the skating do the talking, not Vee or gameplay gimmicks.

Robert Jones

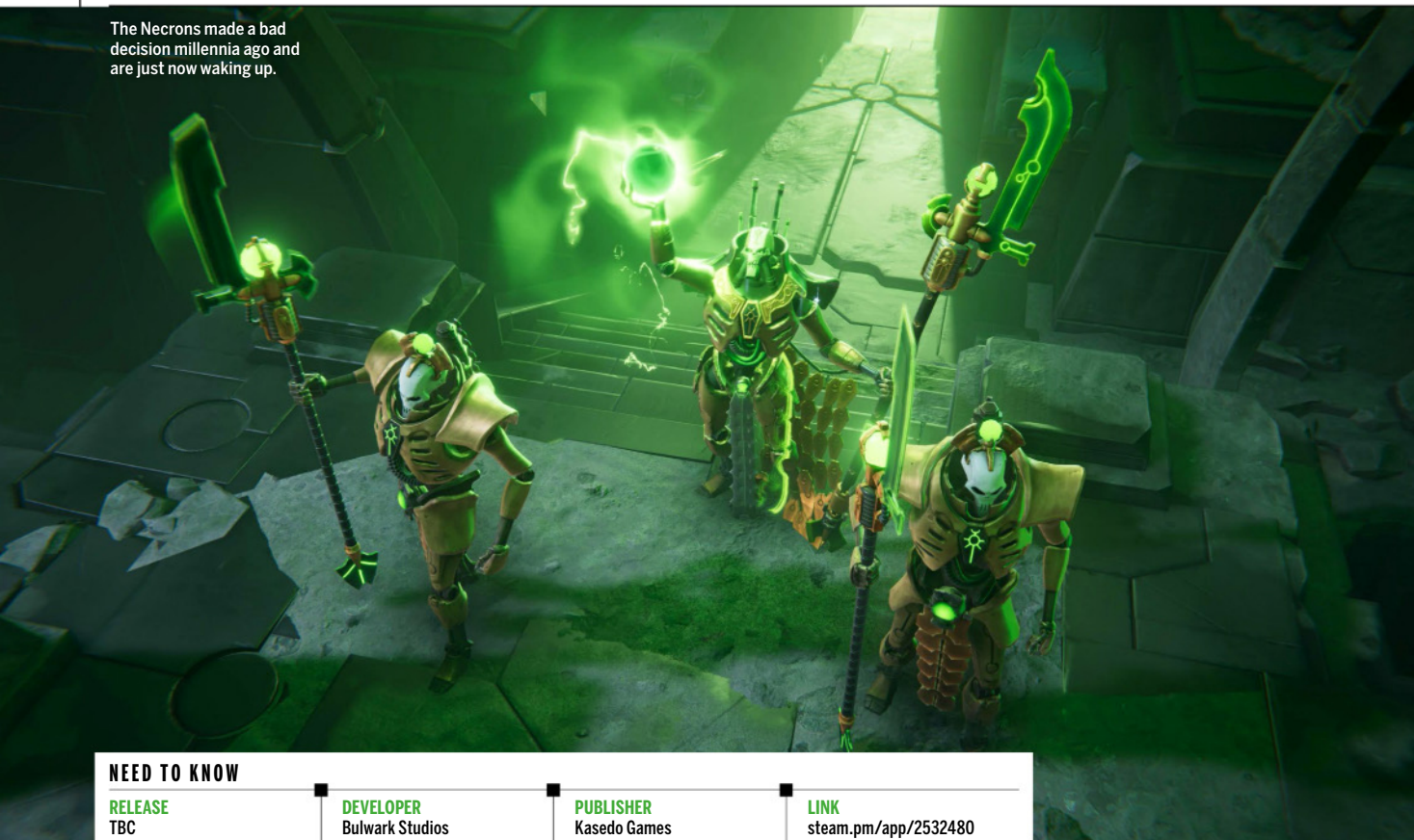
A GAME BUILT BY PEOPLE WHO THINK THEY ARE IMITATING SKATE CULTURE



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

The Necrons made a bad decision millennia ago and are just now waking up.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Bulwark Studios

PUBLISHER
Kasedo Games

LINK
steam.pm/app/2532480

WARHAMMER 40K: MECHANICUS II

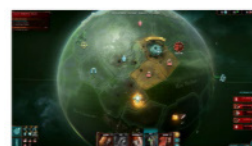
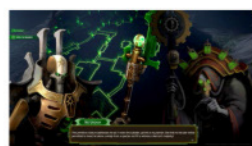
It's priests vs dwarfs vs skeletons in the battle for Hekatus 4

We've known Warhammer 40K's version of XCOM starring the gribbly transhuman weirdos of the Adeptus Mechanicus is getting a sequel for a while, but now there's a demo on Steam, and it's good to see that Bulwark Studios has embraced the Mechanicus' guiding philosophy by performing some upgrades.

FIRST LOOK

The most notable is the repositioning of the turn queue from the top of the screen to the right, which somehow feels like a better place for it despite *Baldur's Gate III*'s equivalent being at the top. The demo functions as the game's tutorial, so you're not faced with a huge amount of resistance, just a few Necrons.

These skeletal aliens housed in bodies of living metal seem to have become the natural enemies of the Mechanicus, as not only do they live – or at least exist – in underground warrens full of the kind of



valuable prizes that tempt the heavily augmented tech priests and their armies of cybernetic Skitarii and lobotomised servitors in, but their non-organic technology is exactly the sort of thing that can be analysed and overridden by someone with a mechanical mind. One early decision in the demo hinges on opening a door either by applying some voltage in the right place or by strapping some ammunition to it and making it go boom. Subtlety turns out to be the right choice here, but that's no guarantee it will continue to be that way.

PURGE THE XENOS

The tech priest in the demo is a wonderfully ornate creature, with insect-like legs and an array of weaponry,

both ranged and melee. As a tactics game, each unit takes turns to move rather than both sides making their moves one after the other, and you'll need to move into position and preferably take cover before unleashing your weaponry. Necrons are tough customers who can be reanimated after being knocked down, but they're not the only bad guys you'll face.

Space dwarfs, known in the 40K universe as the Leagues of Votann, are stocky but high-tech abhumans whose society is ruled by AI 'ancestor cores' – exactly the kind of abominable intelligences the Mechanicus is going to want to see purged from the galaxy in the name of the Omnissiah. They're also explorers and tinkerers, setting up a three-way struggle that could be extremely interesting, especially once your Mechanicus forces are powered up and you take advantage of the Space Marines who have been shown coming to your aid, though as CPU-controlled characters helping to create the feeling of a larger battle, and not as a playable faction. So while the flesh may be weak, *Mechanicus 2* is looking strong.

THE TECH PRIEST IN THE DEMO IS A WONDERFULLY ORNATE CREATURE



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC 2026

DEVELOPER
Auroch Digital

PUBLISHER
Auroch Digital

LINK
steam.pm/app/2281620

MARS HORIZON 2: THE SEARCH FOR LIFE

Where no remotely operated rover has gone before

The idea of steering a little robot around on the surface of another planet, collecting samples and piecing together evidence of life elsewhere in our solar system is an irresistible one, and *Mars Horizon 2* puts you in Mission Control on a mission not just of exploration, but launching rockets too. That's science and fun in equal measure.

It's not just Mars you'll be exploring, either, though that planet with its randomly moving dust storms that can damage your rover and its payload, will be a focus of your early exploration attempts. You'll drop rovers on the Moon too, where micrometeorite showers cause you to scoot out of the area, across canyons, riverbeds, craters and rock fields. Meanwhile, there's the ever-present threat of space debris coming crashing down on your head (or camera array).

In less well-explored areas, such as the surface of Jupiter's moon Io, volcanic eruptions create obstacles to your path, and heat vents can open anywhere on the map to cook your rover. Titan, in orbit around Saturn and the only known moon in the solar system with a dense atmosphere, you'll encounter cryo-volcanoes and frost storms to go along with the acid rain. Being a little rover isn't easy in a solar system filled with hazards.

BOLDLY GOING

Luckily, you'll have different kinds of rover to tackle these hostile environments, and can build bases out there too. Support and resources are improved by making scientific discoveries with your rovers, so you'll need to drill into the rocks and perhaps discover fossilised microbes or evidence of water if you want to expand your space agency and keep sending rovers up, eventually building mining bases to make yourself less dependent on outside forces.

Developed in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh and the European Space Agency, the game makes claims of scientific accuracy, but really is about sending your little trundling guys into inhospitable places and hoping nothing happens to them. Just as with the real Mars rovers, the instrument clusters of the rovers exude personality, so you can find yourself caring about them.

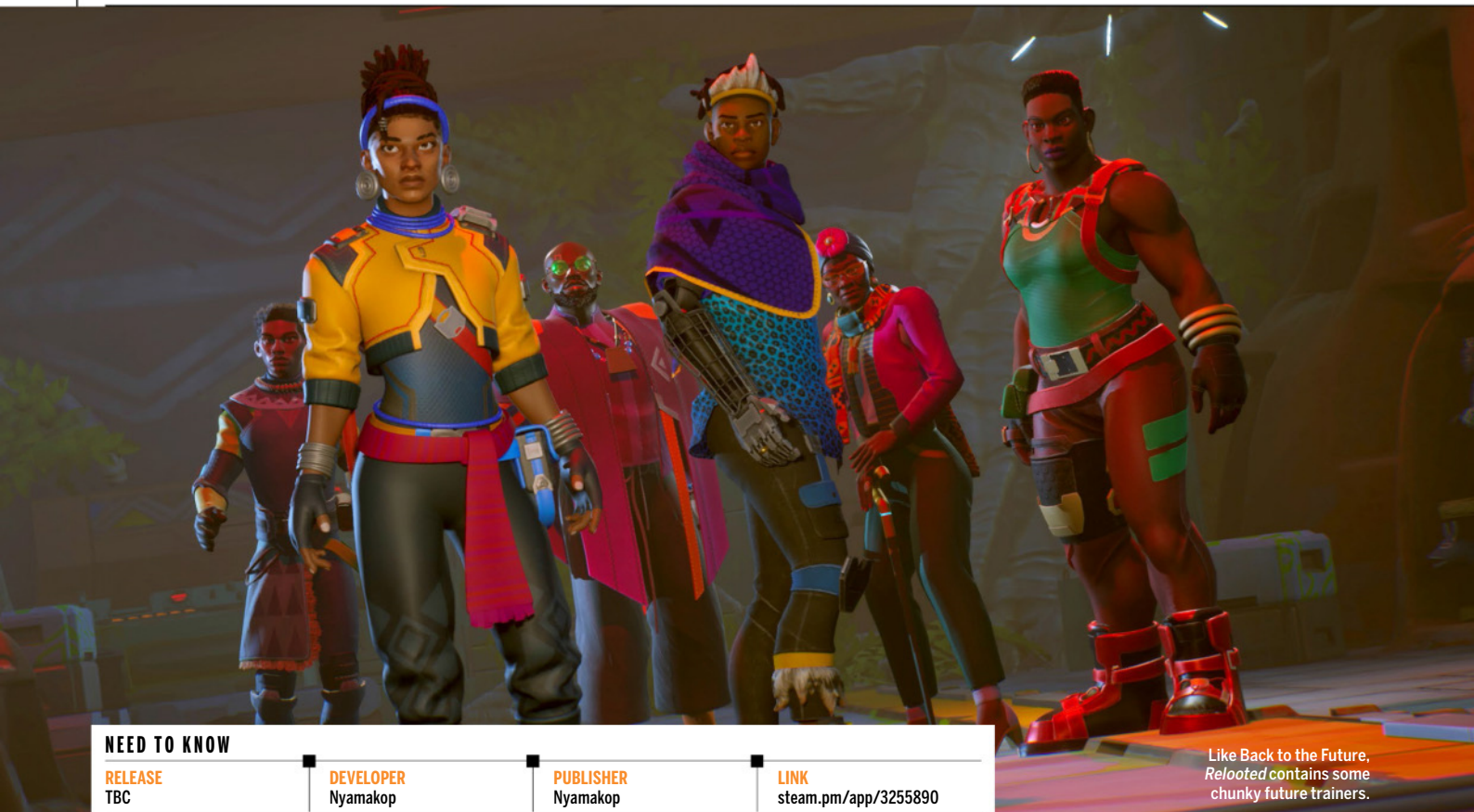
PLAYED
IT



Just like the real thing, Mars here is studded with interesting rocks.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Nyamakop

PUBLISHER
Nyamakop

LINK
steam.pm/app/3255890

Like *Back to the Future*, *Relooted* contains some chunky future trainers.

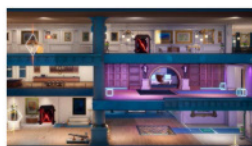
RELOOTED

Robbing the robbed back from those who robbed it

That belongs in a museum," was a great line when Indy said it, but he never mentioned that museum being in the artefact's country of origin. *Relooted* takes a practical approach to antiquities languishing in places they perhaps shouldn't be: taking them back. After all, is it really stealing?

PLAYED
IT

Well some people think it is. Set in a future version of Johannesburg, and created by a South African developer, your liberation crew with its eye on the spoils of colonialism held in Western museums is led by an art historian and made up of scientists, hackers and even MMA fighters (the game is non-violent) rather than safe-crackers, burglars and knife-wielding maniacs. Main character Nomali is an acrobat, able to jump and free-run across obstacles, a speed-boost button allowing her to dash under descending doors like



Indy, while other members of the crew can be used for specific problems.

The game feels a little like *Gunpoint* as you run left and right, occasionally disappearing into doors and down staircases in order to change floors. You can pull tables around to jump to higher platforms or prevent security doors from descending, and there's plenty of crashing through windows, though security glass may require swinging from a hook to build up momentum, or the help of a friend.

The museums in *Relooted* have removed their controversial artefacts (all 70 of which are based on real-life items) from public display, exploiting a loophole in a return treaty so that they don't have to give them back. As such, much of the game shown so far takes place in

backroom corridors rather than open areas thronging with visitors.

DAWN RAID

Planning your exit from a successfully reloomed museum is as important as finding the artefacts in the first place. They're filled with alarms and doors, blocking off escape routes. You're accompanied by a flying drone that can move outside the floors of the building, zooming the view out and uncovering the contents of rooms you can't see into.

Each heist is planned in advance, with the information you glean about the building and its location giving clues to how best to tackle it, as well as getting input from some shady characters. The artefacts themselves are interesting too, potentially leading to rabbit holes of Wikipedia research as you read up on their significance and the circumstances of their acquisition by museum collectors.

Relooted brings a fresh setting – it's not quite the Afrofuturism of *Black Panther*, though there are parallels – and some interesting subject matter to the heist game. There's a demo on Steam.

**NOMALI IS AN
ACROBAT, ABLE TO
JUMP AND FREE-RUN
ACROSS OBSTACLES**



WINDSTORM: THE LEGEND OF KHIIMORI

Crafting and survival in
13th century Mongolia

there's also a bit of *Death Stranding* here as you plot routes across the steppe, fight off wolves, and deliver packages.

A unique aspect of the game comes in breeding and training your own horses, combining bloodlines to produce mounts better suited to the conditions you're facing. Equine behaviour has, apparently, been refined and approved by experts, so there should be a bit more to it than nuzzling everyone for sugarlumps.

Otherwise, you'll be gathering resources, hunting and crafting to get by on the plains, with horseback archery among the skills you can master.

Windstorm's amazing landscapes, all steep cliffs, flower-filled meadows and wildlife, seem to be as much a character in the game as the riders making their way through them.

FIRST
LOOK



Windstorm raised a lot of money on Kickstarter, and the fruits of this are beginning to show in its sumptuous open world. The setting is 13th century Mongolia, and you are a courier on a horse. While it may look a lot like *Red Dead Redemption 2* as you trot between message drops,

RELEASE
November 4, 2025

DEVELOPER
Aesir Interactive

PUBLISHER
Mindscape

LINK
steam.pm/app/2697000



FIRST
LOOK

THE MIDNIGHT WALKERS

Zombies take over a tower
block. Splattery fun ensues

RELEASE
November 21, 2025

DEVELOPER
Oneway Ticket Studio

PUBLISHER
Oneway Ticket Studio

LINK
steam.pm/app/2795540

A zombie extraction FPS for one or three players coming soon to Early Access, *Midnight Walkers* features a crafting system

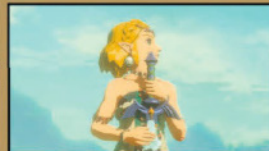
you can only access if you successfully escape a level. Die, and you lose everything you had in your pockets. Poison gas that seeps into the floors of

Liberty Grand Center doesn't help matters, and other survivors – split into the categories of tank, support, sniper – are an even bigger threat.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

NINTENDO SWITCH 2 EDITION

YOUR EPIC ADVENTURE IS **NOW ENHANCED** FOR NINTENDO SWITCH 2



ENHANCED
VISUALS

FASTER LOADING
TIMES

A SMOOTHER
GAMEPLAY
EXPERIENCE



GET EVEN MORE OUT
OF YOUR ADVENTURE
WITH ZELDA NOTES*

Navigation	My Play Data
Voice Memories	Global Play Data
Autobuild Sharing	Daily Bonus
Item Sharing	amiibo
Photo Studio	

Explore the land, sky, and depths of Hyrule
like never before on Nintendo Switch 2.

With higher resolution, improved frame rates,
and HDR support, the expansive world of
Hyrule has never looked better.



*A compatible smart device is required. Internet connection fees may apply. A Nintendo Switch Online membership is not required to use ZELDA NOTES.



HYRULE WARRIORS Age of Imprisonment

FIGHT IN THE IMPRISONING WAR

CO-OP MULTIPLAYER



Step on to the battlefield as Princess Zelda, King Rauru, and other legendary heroes. Battle hordes of enemies to reclaim your homeland. Uncover ancient truths that were only glimpsed in *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*.

Play with a friend, even if they don't own a copy of the game or a Nintendo Switch 2.



*GameShare via GameChat only available on Nintendo Switch 2 and requires a stable Internet connection. Until March 31st 2026, GameChat can be enjoyed for free. Afterwards, a Nintendo Switch Online membership will be required.



THE UNTOLD STORY OF
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

OUT NOW!



ONLY FOR NINTENDO SWITCH 2

GOL TYE



At long last, a turn-based strategy legend returns from the far side of the map in **HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC: OLDEN ERA**

By Jeremy Peel

DRIFT ARC

Heroes of Might and Magic: Olden Era

A

s you push back the fog of war on the continent of Jadame, you'll often stumble over ruins.

Moss-covered standing stones and mana-infused obelisks, cracked open by thick vines and the passage of time. Towering trees of burnt orange and violet jostling for room with kneeling statues, their stone palms turned upward in supplication to a god no one remembers.

It's a fitting backdrop to *Heroes of Might and Magic*, a turn-based strategy classic which defined the genre before dropping out of it completely.

Original developer New World Computing died in 2003, after which point the series bounced between different studios, never finding a permanent home. Amid diminishing returns, publisher Ubisoft simply stopped making it. For a full decade now, the series has been in the wind. To an entire generation of PC gamers, *Heroes of Might and Magic* is an ancient mystery.

But that's the thing about the fog of war: you never quite know what's going on behind it. Five years ago, a studio named Unfrozen finished work on *Iratus: Lord of the Dead*, a well-liked tactical roguelike in the mode of *Darkest Dungeon*. It

impressed more than 500,000 players on Steam, who brought death to the mortal realms at the head of a necromancer's army.

Afterwards, Unfrozen reached for an unlikely next project. "We decided to make something ambitious," says CEO Denis Fedorov. "I'm a huge fan of *Heroes of Might and Magic* since my childhood, I played every single game. So it was always a dream for me to work on it. We decided, why not try?"

The studio put together a small demo and made a pitch to Ubisoft: it was time to defrost *Heroes*. "We got the green light," Fedorov says. "It's a pretty great responsibility, because the playerbase is quite huge, and the expectations from the fans are quite high. But we have a vision, and we definitely hope that the project will be successful and satisfy expectations."

There is reason for hope, beyond the pedigree Unfrozen has demonstrated thus far. Alongside Ubisoft this time is Hooded Horse, a name strategy heads have come to associate with quality in the wake of viral city builders *Manor Lords* and *Against the Storm* – not to mention Soren Johnson's *Old World*, which PC Gamer named the best strategy game of 2021. Most recently, the US outfit took over publishing duties from Sega for *Endless Legend 2*, ushering the 4X to a successful Early Access launch in September.

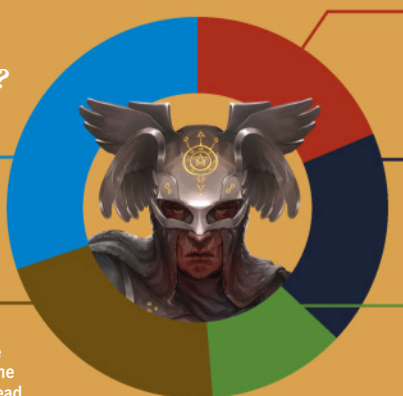
TO A GENERATION OF PC GAMERS, HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC IS A MYSTERY

MIGHTY MAJESTY

What makes the series tick?

30% ADVENTURE
Getting in the saddle to explore a map straight out of Tolkien.

21% CERTAINTY
Tactical battles where every possible outcome can be considered ahead of time, if you're a genius.



19% UNCERTAINTY
Worrying about what's going on in the fog of war. It can't be good.

18% HIGH FANTASY
A universe where armour is slightly shinier than in other games.

12% SOUNDTRACK
Sometimes you have to kick back to some harpsichord vibes.



"Their expertise and advice was quite important for us," Fedorov says. "They know things specific to this genre and how to work with this particular audience, so we are definitely thankful to them for joining."

Another reason for hope is the demo build that PC Gamer has had its gauntlets on for a couple of weeks at the time of writing, and is now available on Steam. *Heroes of Might and Magic: Olden Era* undoubtedly looks the part. It is an unashamedly colourful amalgam of gleaming armour, white-winged steeds and heavenly shafts of light – the latter bouncing off the golden ramparts of impossibly tiered castles that would make a structural engineer weep.

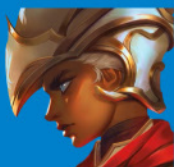
But more than that, *Olden Era* feels like *Heroes* too. This is the series you might have imagined when you opened the inside cover of your first Tolkien, CS Lewis or RA Salvatore novel and took in the sweeping scale of an illustrated map – immediately escaping into daydreamed treks over mountain ranges, through dark



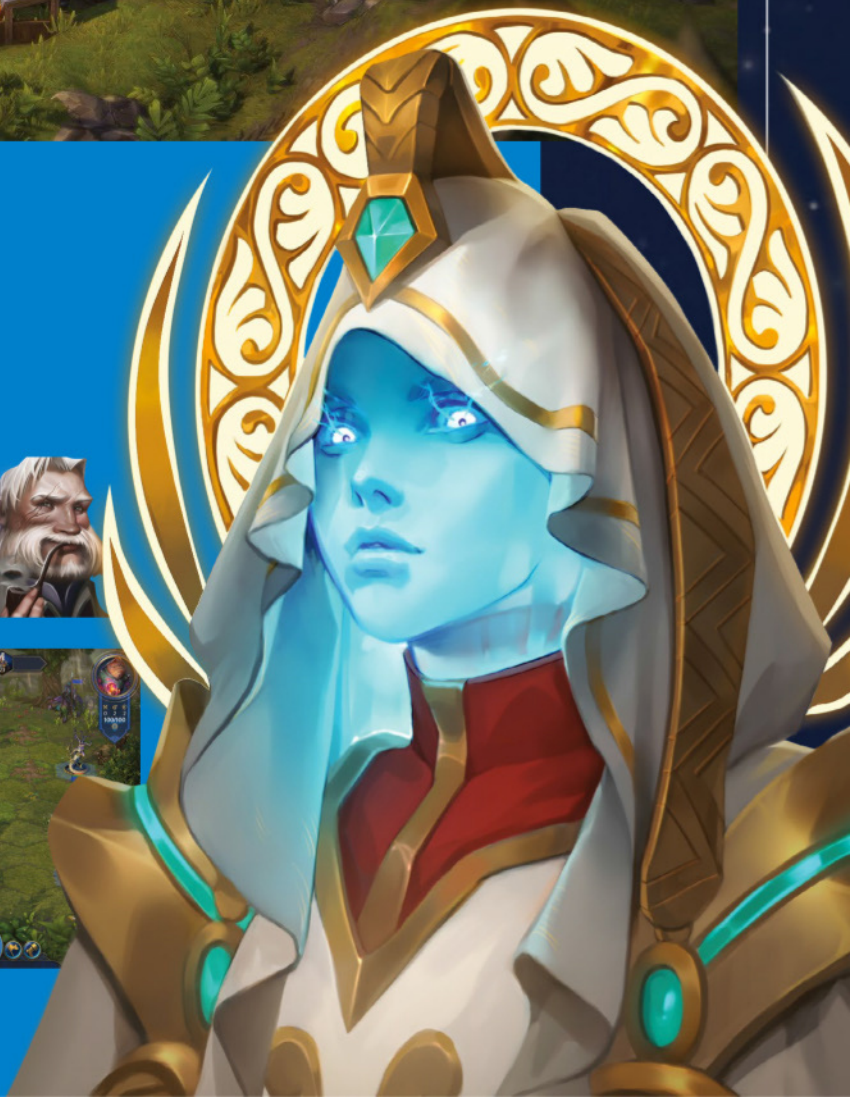
FACTION CHECK

TEMPLE

The High Inquisition is all about self-improvement, striving to forge the best version of oneself. And to reforge others



RIGHT:
Counterattacks can be lethal, so you'll want to think it through before swinging your sword.





FACTION CHECK

NECROPOLIS

The rulers of the lands surrounding Shadowspire are necromancers and vampires, traditionally responsible for performing the last rites of the locals



TOP: Cities are impressively vertiginous and OTT, only becoming more so as you add more buildings.



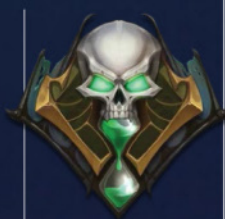


☞ forests and across murky swamps. These are the strategy games that dare to tackle the fantasy from both ends, asking you to conquer and construct cities, lead stacks of bowmen and hydras into battle, and steer individual heroes into skirmishes to find magical treasures.

META-STRATEGY LAYER

Olden Era, like its predecessors, is a game that ought to be uttered in the same breath as *XCOM* – marrying a meta-strategy layer to tactical battles in such a way that the outcome of any action can ultimately have an impact halfway across the world, like the flap of a griffin's wings. Perhaps that's why, when I ask game director Leonid Parmenov what makes *Heroes* special, via the translation of narrative generalist Katharina Viveros, his first words are that it is "incredibly complex".

"There are a lot of small foundation bricks, including the game mechanics, the narrative, the music," he says. "I strongly believe that if you remove one of those bricks from the



project, it's already difficult to call the result *Heroes of Might and Magic*. Each of those parts is crucially important for it to be a *Heroes* game."

Just as essential, I would suggest, is the fact that *Heroes* never overwhelms. Sitting down to take your turn is nothing like getting to grips with an impressive-yet-impenetrable grand strategy game like *Hearts of Iron*. Instead, your daunting tasklist is made manageable, delivered to you step by step.

Every day in Jadame, you direct your heroes in turn – expending their movement points by cantering down roads to discover new territory, capture gold mines, and rob monsters of loot. You interact with each of your cities, one by one – constructing new buildings to upgrade your troops and improve your economy.

Then, every week, you recruit more soldiers. And when troops clash, you resolve conflict by heading to the turn-based battle screen and thrash it out on the hexagons. Or automatically, if you're feeling lazy. At every juncture, there's an obvious next stage. You just have to do it more efficiently than your opponent.

It's a compelling formula that ought to have found purchase in the post-*XCOM* landscape, where the appetite for varied and well-polished turn-based strategy games has exploded. So where have latter-day *Heroes* entries gone wrong?

"This is my personal opinion, not as a game developer but as a player,"

Fedorov says. "We were huge fans of the first part of the series, especially *Heroes II* and *III*. At some stage the progression of the series started to go not in an evolutionary but a revolutionary way."

Fedorov points out that the series began to stray from its roots even while New World Computing was still in charge – and is careful to praise the talent and expertise of subsequent developers, like *Heroes of Might and Magic V* custodians Nival. "But they drastically changed the base gameplay loop of the game," he says. "Switching to 3D, changing the hexes to squares on the battlefield, a

map with realistic proportions of objects and so on. Some of the changes were great, some of them not too great."

Parmenov suggests that

developers began experimenting without fully understanding their audience, "We believe it's very important to create a game first and foremost for the player."

THERE WAS ALREADY A PUSH TO RETURN THE SERIES TO ITS ROOTS

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

By *Heroes VII*, there was already a push to return the series to its roots. "But there were technical difficulties," Fedorov says. "Overall, I respect the whole series. There were quite interesting decisions, and we're trying to extract the best things from each of them. But personally, I'm a fan of *Heroes II* and *III* mostly."

It's a common opinion, and when Fedorov speaks about those games in particular, his analysis is steeped in

HOLDING OUT FOR A... Some nuances to the series

1 TALE OF TAILS

Knights, lances and dragons all contribute to the heightened, fantasy feel of the *Heroes* series. Unfrozen is determined to introduce some extra nuance.

2 SHIELD WALL

Siege battles play a part in the *Heroes* formula, but were somewhat undeveloped in earlier entries. Now you'll be able to install additional defences.



3 PUB GENIUS

If you capture a city tied to a specific faction, you'll get access to powerful benefits. You'll also be able to recruit extra heroes from the tavern.

4 GETTING PILES

Wood, found lying around the place, is one basic resource you'll rely on to construct buildings, hire troops and study spells.



THE STUDIO HAS SET ITS REBOOT IN THE LAND OF ENROTH

UNFRIENDLY WELCOME

You'll need to battle guards to capture cities, get loot, and clear the roads. You can size enemies up beforehand to avoid starting a fight you can't finish.

☞ nostalgia. “We spent hundreds and hundreds of hours with this magical feeling of, ‘I’ll just capture the next castle, and go to sleep,’” he says. “Everything clicked, was synchronised, had good synergy between awesome graphics, fantastic characters and interesting lore. It was a great mix of strategy planning with a lot of different tactical battle possibilities. When everything works

together and you feel it, at this point the game becomes pure legendary.”

It’s that ‘click’ that Unfrozen is reaching for, and it’s already been sending out Bat-signals to fans of the classics. You may have noticed that *Olden Era* has reversed a 2010s name change – for a while there, the series was officially known as *Might & Magic Heroes*, but no longer. And the studio has set its reboot in the land of

Enroth, a backdrop it shares with the earliest *Heroes* games.

“With the name and the whole thing about *Olden Era*, we want to have this nostalgic vibe to it,” says marketing lead Katya Prikhodko. “We wanted to tap into all these memories of youthful days that feel very cosy, familiar and a little simpler. But we also want the game to be interesting to the modern day



HERO(ES)

This is you, but recruiting several more heroes will enable you to explore the map faster. Capturing and keeping hold of cities increases the number you can command at once.

HOCUS POTION

Alchemical dust is tough to produce but essential for enhancing your artefacts. It's also used to upgrade spells and construct better creature dwellings in cities.

SQUID LINK

The rubbery Schism faction is drawn from the lore of 2000's *Might and Magic VIII*. A cult of elves emerging from the Frozen Vast has managed to summon and bind horrors.

audience. Some of them may have heard about *Heroes* somewhere before, but now they will have a chance to find a mix of old and new. This is one of our mottos here."

So where is *Unfrozen* evolving the formula? "Ten years ago, the RPG systems in the *Heroes* games were not that well developed," Parmenov says. "When they tried to deepen the development of your hero, the skill

branches, it created some difficulties. And so we're trying to modernise."

GROWTH OF YOUR HEROES

In *Olden Era*, the growth of your heroes during a match is a somewhat randomised process. The attributes and secondary skills they pick up when levelling are influenced by whether they're a 'Might' or 'Magic' specialist – pushing them

towards army improvements or spellslinging respectively.

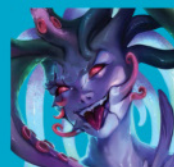
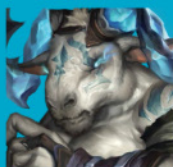
But you also make key choices as you go, in a step-by-step fashion that suits the series. It's very possible to pursue spell specialisations according to whim, but experts will combine particular skills to unlock advanced classes. Consider that you'll also hunt for artefacts like rings and swords – equippable as matching sets for



FACTION CHECK

SCHISM

If you meddle with ancient rituals to unleash terrible power, don't be surprised if you can't control it



TOP: Taking mills and mines is the only way you're going to improve cities and upgrade your combat capabilities.

LEFT: A certain wriggleness defines the units of the Schism faction.

Heroes of Might and Magic: Olden Era



additional bonuses – and you're looking at an approachable yet highly flexible character development.

It's easy to see how Unfrozen's experience with *Iratus* might have led the studio here. "In general, the *Heroes* game loop has some similarity with roguelikes," Parmenov says. "At basically every moment of the game, you are in front of a choice. Do you take this skill? Do you want to interact with this object, or pick up some item?"

Factions are another area in which Unfrozen has seen fit to gently advance the *Heroes* formula. While the team is keen to preserve the "fairytale-like" atmosphere associated with the series, they see potential to complicate the tone of Enroth with moral ambiguity that might appeal to a generation that has grown up with *The Witcher*.

"As you can imagine, we believe that the modern audience is more interested in this kind of approach," Parmenov says. "And we simply believe that this will allow us to create a much more interesting story where you have space to make your own conclusions." The human Templars might project nobility, but you can expect to hear alternate perspectives on their mission to spread religion across Jadame.

The continent itself is something of a blank slate, too – one that hasn't been seen before in the *Heroes* games, instead featuring in a millennium-era CRPG from New World Computing called *Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer*. "Inside the *Heroes* games, this place was never properly explored," Parmenov says. "*Olden Era* is a prequel, so we know how this whole story will end. Our task is to give the players an entertaining story that at the same time will not contradict with what was already established."

LOVECRAFTIAN CREATURES

The chthonic, Lovecraftian creatures of *Might and Magic VIII* have inspired a whole new faction, Schism, whose tentacled monsters specialise in unavoidable damage and ability control. The group is both entirely fresh to *Heroes* and deeply connected

to existing series lore. A mix of old and new, like the motto.

The form of *Olden Era*'s tactical battles is traditional, yet remains distinctive within the canon of turn-based combat. 'Chess-like' may be an overused adjective in the genre, but is earned by the deadly dance to capture pieces – as much about evasion and keeping troops out of reach as decisive, killing blows. Units of the same type can be 'stacked' one on top of the other, making them much more powerful. But weak, single-stack soldiers can be an incredibly useful tool, blocking off parts of the board and absorbing

counterattacks from formidable opponents, so that more valuable comrades can come in swinging without fear.

In fact, this latter strategy

has inspired a special ability in *Olden Era*. The human faction, Temple, automatically buffs stronger stacks when low-tier creatures fall. "It's part of our philosophy of working with the community, asking their opinion, and picking ideas not just from previous *Heroes* titles but also from how people like to play *Heroes*," Fedorov says. "If there is something people like, why not make it a fundamental part of the gameplay? These days, you cannot create successful games, especially strategy games, without working deeply with your audience."

It's a lesson Unfrozen learned working on *Iratus*, and will carry forward into *Olden Era* – which will be getting an Early Access launch in 2026. "It's not some kind of Early Access where you have 20% or 30% of the gameplay and that's it, expecting that everything else will be done at a later stage," Fedorov says. "Right now, a lot of the game is in a pretty good state." Certainly, the build we've tested is polished and absent of obvious gaps in its feature list.

Olden Era's Early Access release will feature a good third of the eventual singleplayer campaign – a full chapter, which represents roughly 15 to 20 hours of cerebral adventuring. There'll be a bunch of solo scenarios to play through, and a "pretty deep" random map generator, "probably the most

BIG PERSONALITIES

Heroes ranked by name alone

1



LEON STICKFINGERS

2



THE BEEKEEPER

3



FUNERELLA

4



THE EYE COLLECTIVE

5



JOHN JOHNSON

6



GROO



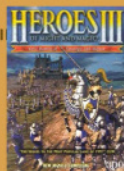
Heroes of Might and Magic: Olden Era

HERO'S STORY *A magical timeline***KING'S BOUNTY**
1990

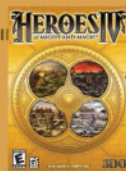
Widely considered *Heroes'* forerunner, and now a series in its own right.

**HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC**
1995

The planet Enroth was invented for this spinoff from the RPG series.

**HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC III**
1999

A shiny refinement of a beloved formula. Regarded as a classic.

**HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC IV**
2002

New World Computing destroyed Enroth for its final sequel.

**HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V**
2006

Ubisoft bought the rights and handed the reins to Nival, of *Silent Storm* fame.

**HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC VII**
2015

Limbic Entertainment asked players to vote on the factions included.

advanced in the series". Among the multiplayer-focused variants will be a single-hero mode, "because some people preferred to play *Heroes III* with just one hero".

"The advantage of one-hero mode is that it's quite beginner-friendly," Federov says. "You don't need to control ten at the same time, and usually you have one final battle. When you lose, you lose. When you win, you win." Most pertinently, cutting the number of heroes drastically reduces the length of the average match.

"Because these days, there is a different generation of gamers," Federov says. "In MOBAs, it's a maximum of 40 to 45 minutes. For *Counter-Strike*, *Fortnite* and *PUBG*, it's 20 or 30 minutes." He acknowledges there's no way to shrink turn-based strategy down to the length of a battle royale bust-up, but the hope is that players can fit a single-hero showdown inside an hour's lunchbreak.

"For the ones who don't like to wait too much, we implemented arena mode," Federov says. "Where you're just picking the heroes, the skills, the abilities, creatures and so on, inspired by some card games. Just to have a quick final fight of 15 to 20 minutes, and you're done."

THE STUDIO HOPES TO IMPLEMENT SUBTERRANEAN EXPLORATION**LONGER TERM**

In the longer term, Unfrozen is working on a map editor. "It's at an early stage of development," Federov says, "but it's already quite powerful." And eventually, the studio has hopes to implement subterranean exploration and sea travel, but has

pegged these features for very late development or even DLC. In the meantime, the team will dedicate much of its energy to fielding the community's wants and concerns during Early Access. "There will be a lot of feedback, obviously," Federov says. "And probably we will realise that something is missing which definitely should be in the game."

Unfrozen knows that balancing will be a huge deal, and considers itself well-prepared. Federov is proud of the fact that when *Iratus* came out, the studio published its first balance patch within just a few hours.

"Why were we able to do that? Because, first of all, our game design team has a lot of experience with balancing," he says. "Some people worked on MMORPGs before." Beyond the mathematical model Unfrozen has created to dig into the interplay of every creature and faction, it's already pulling from player reports in closed testing.

"We will also receive data from players anonymously," Federov says. "So collecting this data and analysing we will definitely see that, for example, the pick rate of this creature

is too high, or the win rate of this faction is abnormally high, or somebody is stuck somewhere. We will see this in real time."

Heroes entries are lifelong

comfort games for many – built to last not for hundreds of hours, but thousands. *Olden Era*, then, is like a new pair of brogues in a beloved style. And it's only once players have walked around and worn them in that Unfrozen will be able to determine whether the systems it



has put together truly fit. "There is a long road ahead, so don't expect that everything works like a charm in Early Access in terms of balancing, because it's always back and forth," Federov says. "You cannot satisfy everyone."

That said, Unfrozen does not take its launch responsibility to Early Access players lightly. "We are treating this Early Access as a full release, because we know it is important for us to have this shot, and we don't want to waste it," Prikhodko says. "So we want to be as prepared as possible, even with the small team that we have."

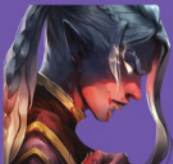
Right now, Unfrozen is an international studio of around 50 people, working remotely from parts of the world as far-flung as Limassol, Tashkent and Belgrade. It's only fitting that *Olden Era* is made by a team from all over the map. One which grew up spellbound by *Heroes of Might and Magic*, and is now determined to write an epic as grand and sprawling as those which came before. ■



FACTION CHECK

DUNGEON

A triumvirate of native races that has emerged from underground to become the dominant political force on the continent



TOP: You'll encounter neutral squads on the map, who you can fight to nick their stuff.

RIGHT: Keeping track of turn order and the weapon reach of your opponents is quite literally half the battle.



PC GAMER

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**ONE OF THE MOST
QUOTABLE CHARACTERS
IN GAMING AND
A PURVEYOR OF
FINE WEAPONRY**



PC GAMER

15

BEST
IN-GAME SHOPS
ON PC

By Dainella Lucas

RELEASED Mar 24, 2023 DEVELOPER Capcom

Resident Evil 4
Remake

Welcome, stranger

1 “What’re ya buyin’?” You can’t not hear that phrase without hearing that voice and picturing the coat that goes with it. *Resident Evil 4*’s Merchant is one of the most quotable characters in gaming and is a purveyor of fine weaponry. He also proves that you don’t need a chic boutique or prime location to still do good business, you just need to fulfil a need and have a big coat with a lot of pockets.

Despite only getting a few lines and being a bit of a throwaway in the original *Resident Evil 4*, he gained such a cult following that he’s since been fleshed out in the *Remake*. He manages to stock an impressive amount of weapons and appear exactly when and where he is needed. Like when Leon Kennedy or Ada Wong are about to fight a nasty baddie. It also helps that he’s the only stockist willing to hang around the village, so he has the whole market to himself.

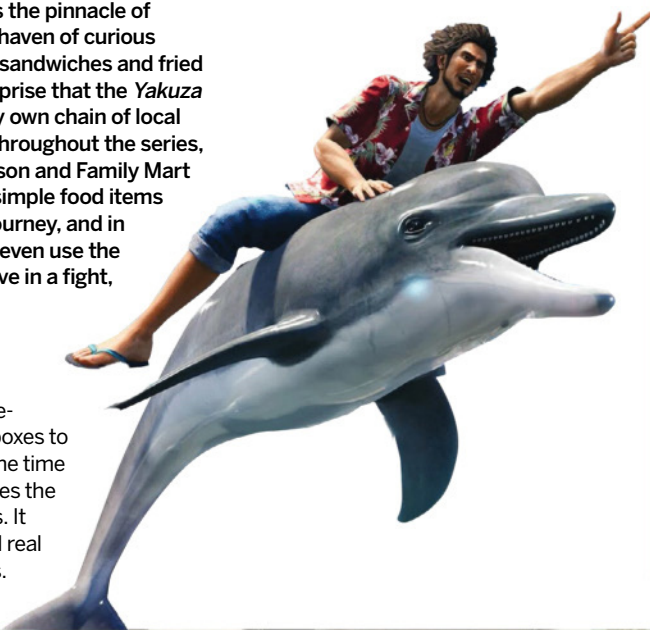
RELEASED Jan 25, 2024 DEVELOPER Sega

Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth

Poppo on in

2 The humble konbini is the pinnacle of shopping in Japan. A haven of curious snacks, perfectly cut sandwiches and fried chicken, so it's no surprise that the *Yakuza* games have their very own chain of local shops. Poppo stores can be found throughout the series, and are modelled after real life Lawson and Family Mart stores. They're home to a range of simple food items and health boosts to take on your journey, and in some of the older games you could even use the store's microwave as a finishing move in a fight, or read from the magazine rack.

It's the banality of the shop we love though. There aren't any clothes or weapons to get here, it's just pure pre-packaged convenience and rows of boxes to explore. The fact that *Yakuza* takes the time to include boring places like this makes the games feel like such complete places. It makes the streets of Kamurocho feel real when the rest of the game is bonkers.



DEVELOPER FromSoft

Dark Souls Remastered

Never shoplift

3 As one of the first stores you find in *Dark Souls*, the Undead Merchant teaches you a valuable lesson – don't attack the shopkeepers. It's a mistake everyone has made at least once in a *Souls* game, just to see what happens, and then never again. All you get is death and the loss of somewhere to get new gear. Only a few people are friendly in *Dark Souls*, and even fewer want to trade with you, so each one is vital if you want to survive the horrors.

⊗ Give Gift

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...



Yakuza 0

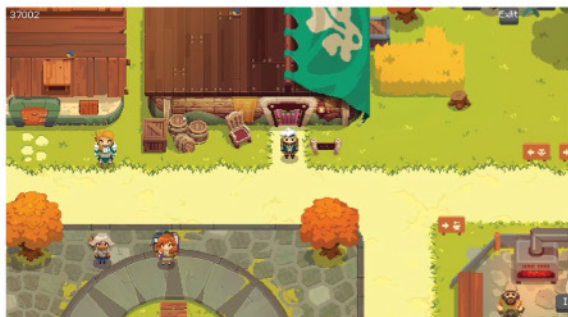
Set in the late '80s, check out the retro shops and designs. Poppo has gone and grown up!

RELEASED May 29, 2018 DEVELOPER Digital Sun

Moonlighter

The night shift pays

4 Sometimes the best shops aren't the ones you visit, but the ones you make yourself. There's a lot to be said for turning a small stall into a thriving business and picking out all of the stock to sell yourself. *Moonlighter* lets you do just that as you run a shop during the day and delve into a dungeon to fight and find your stock during the night. It's a hard life!



RELEASED November 11, 2011 DEVELOPER Bethesda

TESV: Skyrim

See no evil

5 Every adventurer needs to avoid the embarrassment of becoming over-encumbered, which is why all good RPGs need to come with plenty of shops. *Skyrim*'s shops aren't always the best for buying things from, but at least you can sell your weapons. Belethor's Goods in Whiterun is a particular favourite because it's where the bucket trick was first discovered.



DEVELOPER Bungie

Destiny 2

Pay and slay

7 Despite not being that old, *Destiny 2* feels like a bit of a nostalgia pick. This space-faring co-op shooter is nothing like its original iteration any more, but we still get a little kick from looking out for Xur and his rotating selection of wares every week. By limiting his appearance to a few days a week and changing up his stock he always feels special – like it's worth logging in just to see his tentacled face and check out the new weaponry he has on offer even after you've stopped playing the game.



RELEASED September 10, 2010 DEVELOPER EasyGameStation

Recettear

Capitalism, ho!

6 *Moonlighter* might have the whole modern shopkeeping thing nailed further up in this list, but *Recettear* is where it drew its inspirations from. Originally one of the first Japanese indie games on Steam, *Recettear* started as an anime-looking curiosity before becoming a cult hit in its own right. It's a mix of shop

management and dungeon crawling, where you arrange your storefront to attract adventurers, and then hire them later to explore dangerous places and bring back precious loot to sell on. It's a satisfying loop, and one you'll need to master if you want to pay off all of the debt your deadbeat father left you in.

It's a goofy parody of shop ownership and adventure games where locals will give you sob stories about needing to sell their valuables only to then try and give you a ham sandwich or a bowl of curry. It's revenge for all of the junk you fob off in other games to make some coin.

DEVELOPER Mossmouth

Spelunky 2

Dig deep

8

The joy of *Spelunky* is that you never know what you're going to get. Will you get an amazing run full of loot and soft landings, or will you die almost instantly on the first floor? Dropped into that mystery are the game's shopkeepers who turn up wherever they please and sell a random assortment of items. Sometimes they're helpful and have just the thing you need at the right time, other times you'll accidentally set them off on a murderous rampage when something you did further up on the screen triggers them getting hit, and they'll make your life a living hell.

IF YOU LIKE THIS
YOU'LL LOVE...



Rogue Legacy 2

Spend moolah in this roguelike where you inherit your predecessor's genes and wealth.

DROPPED INTO THAT
MYSTERY ARE THE
GAME'S SHOPKEEPERS
WHO TURN UP
WHEREVER THEY PLEASE

RELEASED November 14, 2024 DEVELOPER Square Enix

Dragon Quest III HD-2D

Just the essentials

9 The perfect example of a classic item shop. The *Dragon Quest* series sticks to its traditions, and that includes how it runs each shop and what kind of things they sell. There is always an item shop marked out by a little feather on a sign that sells herbs etc, a weapon shop for swords and the like, and an armour shop. All three shops never change and help form part of the series' backbone.



RELEASED April 14, 2016 DEVELOPER Square Enix

Final Fantasy IX

Bagging bargains

10 As much of an adventurer as Zidane is, Stiltzkin wants nothing more than to travel the world and make a little gil to fund his travels along the way. Moogles are already iconic to *Final Fantasy* as a series, but none are as iconic as Stiltzkin and his little backpack are. You encounter him several times on your journey through *FFIX*, where he sells you collections of rare goods.



DEVELOPER Neoludic Games

Tiny Bookshop

Read all about it

11 This is one for those who wish they could get away from it all and open up a little shop of our own. Sure, it might not be a practical dream as it's pretty hard to make a liveable wage from a shop run from the back of a van, but think of the whimsy! Whiling away the hours reading by the sea as customers peruse your wares and ask for recommendations. The in-game books are actually real ones too, so if you're an avid reader there's an extra layer to the bookselling for you to enjoy.



RELEASED April 24, 2025 DEVELOPER Sandfall Interactive

Expedition 33

Duke it out for a discount

12 The French may have a reputation for being rude and standoffish, but we're pretty sure they never want to physically fight you like the brush-headed retailers of *Expedition 33* do. Like most big RPGs you'll find plenty of shops dotted around the world map near tough areas so you have plenty of opportunities for upgrades

before facing tricky foes. However, the Gestrals will also let you get some fight practice in by locking their best deals behind a round of fisticuffs. If you want to get your hands on everything, you'll need to beat up every single shopkeeper in this fantastical snippet of France. Some can be easily found within important story areas, while others are hidden away in the far-flung corners of the map with all of the best rewards. These cute little paintbrush creatures transform into hulking behemoths that try to pummel you, and only if you succeed in beating them will they let you peruse their full stock list. Talk about snobby!

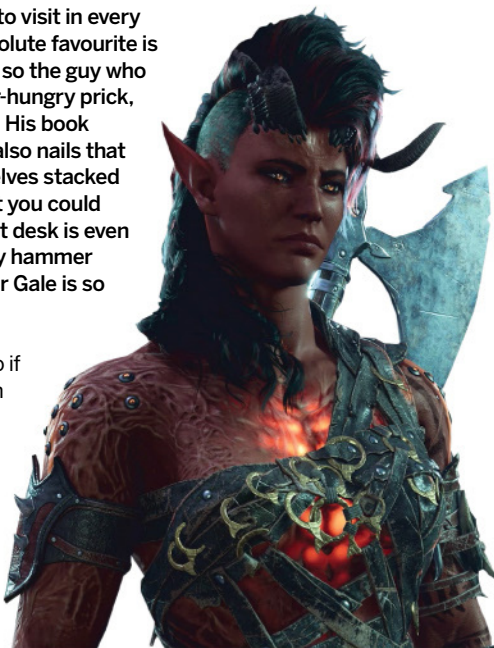
RELEASED August 3, 2023 DEVELOPER Larian

Baldur's Gate III

More than just a store

13 With *BGIII* being so huge there are an insane number of shops to visit in every playthrough, but our absolute favourite is Sorcerer's Sundries. OK, so the guy who owns it is a bit of a power-hungry prick, but at least he sells loads of good stuff. His book collection is particularly impressive. It also nails that feeling of a magical emporium with shelves stacked with spells and demonstrations of what you could learn going on the ground floor. Its front desk is even manned by an astral projection to really hammer home its magical expertise – no wonder Gale is so mad for the place.

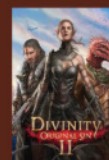
It's also home to loads of great quests so if you're not in the mood for shopping then there's still plenty here worth snooping around for. The guards here are annoyingly good at their jobs, so you'll need to be extra hot with your stealth skills to find the best treasures. Most importantly though, you get the opportunity to fight the smug bastard who runs the joint before helping yourself to all of his best gear.



**YOU SHOULD ALSO
NEVER ACCEPT THE
FIRST PRICE YOU'RE
GIVEN AS YOU CAN
HAGGLE DOWN TO
A BETTER DEAL**



**IF YOU LIKE THIS
YOU'LL LOVE...**



Divinity: Original Sin 2

Vendors regularly change their stock and have rare items to buy.



DEVELOPER Warhorse Studios

Kingdom Come Deliverance 2

Stall-ing tactics

14 The most realistic of the entries on this list, *Kingdom Come*

Deliverance 2 makes you shop around for the best deals. With 60 different traders to find and each one having their own specialties, it's wise to hunt down specific stalls. Looking to sell a sword? Take it to someone who also sells them to get the best price – they'll give you more for it than a general goods store will. You should also never accept the first price you're given as you can haggle down to a better deal. You have to work hard for a bargain!

RELEASED: August 21, 2025 DEVELOPER Crinkle Cut Games

Discounty

Better than a meal deal

15

Supermarkets might not be the most exciting of retail emporiums, but make for great games with plenty of item types and areas to manage.

Discounty sees you opening up a new store in the community that not everyone is happy to see – you'll need to win people over as well as manage your stock if you want to be successful. You'll have to practice your cashier skills as no one likes waiting and you don't want to get any complaints. As your shop becomes central to the community you'll start to dig up all sorts of secrets!



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Impure blood

The original *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines* was a broken and buggy, yet grippingly dark and strangely alluring, RPG when it launched in the shadow of *Half-Life 2* back in 2004. I bought it at launch and, at least for the first half of the game, I was transported into a vivid virtual world that dripped with RPG choice, an engaging narrative, and a simply exquisite gothic vampire vibe. And now, after more than two decades of waiting, we've finally got our teeth into *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines 2*. The good news is that, in terms of top vampire vibes and juicy narrative, the wait has absolutely been worth it. However, there's no doubting that during this game's troubled development, almost all aspects of the RPG that the first game has have been disappointingly stripped out, too. Like the original game, it's cursed with impure blood.

R. Jones

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PRINT EDITOR
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 WHAT YOU THINK**
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This month's undead reviewers...



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
Slaking thirsts

Currently playing
Bloodlines 2

This month
Prowled the streets of Glasgow after dark looking for a hit. That lad loves his Irn-Bru.

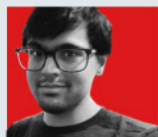


MORGAN PARK

Specialist in
Bowel control

Currently playing
Battlefield 6

This month
Waged a one-man war against the deadliest of foes... he heroically held in a fart while on a date.



TYLER COLP

Specialist in
Cryptic prophecies

Currently playing
Hades II

This month
Transformed himself into Tylos Colpythia, the legendary Oracle at PC Gamer Towers.



JAKE TUCKER

Specialist in
Waxing Pep's head

Currently playing
EA Sports FC 26

This month
Became a true football man by mastering the long throw, dirty tackle and pre-training pint.

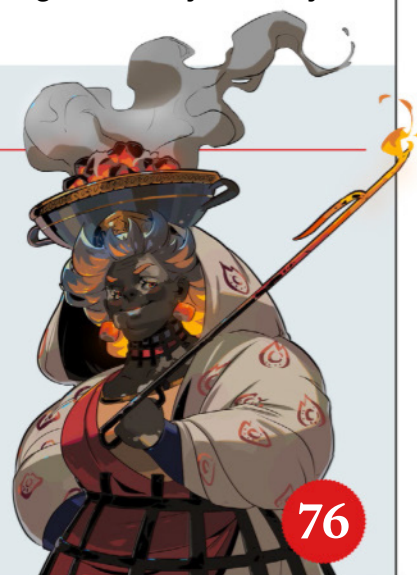


JODY MACGREGOR

Specialist in
Soiling himself

Currently playing
Baby Steps

This month
Comically fell down some stairs and then crapped his pants. Oh, and in *Baby Steps* he...



TWICE BITTEN

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2 is a brilliant undead mystery

By Fraser Brown

You are Phyre, an elder vampire of prodigious strength and no small amount of fame, forced to sleep for a hundred years. And people have been waiting for your return. You wake up in 21st century Seattle, bound by a curse and weighed down by the expectations of modern bloodsuckers.

Amid all this, you must carve out a place for yourself in this new city, along with an identity, even as you're nudged into deals and alliances, bending and adapting as you try to become what Seattle's nighttime residents need: a big scary vamp who can fix everything. Or break everything.

The story of *Bloodlines 2*'s lost protagonist eerily encapsulates the state of the game itself: a long-awaited sequel with years of hopes and assumptions bearing down on it; an RPG that has to be an RPG, has to be a sequel, that strains against its bonds.

TO RPG OR NOT TO RPG

Bloodlines 2 is good, sometimes even great, and it absolutely sated my appetite for a blood-fuelled undead yarn. But it is a sequel in name only, and it never really enthusiastically embraces being an RPG. Given its

predecessor's cult status, and the source material, that's bound to be a disappointment for some.

Instead, it's a conspiracy-laden mystery that's as much Raymond Chandler as it is Anne Rice. You've got a lot of questions in search of answers. What's the deal with the sigil binding you to Seattle? How did you even get here? And why do you have a Malkavian detective in your head? It's a buddy cop deal. Except one cop is an ancient vampire,

and the other one is also a vampire, but he's dead, double-dead, and living inside his pal's noggin. And together they're going to clean up Seattle. While also killing a lot of ghouls.

Chatting, rooting around and killing ne'er-do-wells: that's the gig. Your vampiric senses manifest as a kind of detective vision that highlights certain things of import: blood stains, scents, the heartbeats of

A mystery that's as much Raymond Chandler as it is Anne Rice

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The long-awaited sequel to 2004's cult vampire RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
The Chinese Room

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
steam.pm/app/532790

mortals – that kind of thing. Your crosshair, meanwhile, changes in size to highlight the proximity of important objects, from letters to elixirs that give you health or buffs.

There are some light puzzles, but the conundrums you deal with are primarily social ones, or big-picture things, worked out in conversations with vamps, ghouls and Fabien – the voice in your head. In this regard, it's not unlike a Telltale adventure game, where your relationships and how your actions are perceived by other characters are what drives the story, and your investigation, forwards.

WAR OF WORDS

This is where *Bloodlines* feels like it's most comfortable. Indeed, it's where it excels. Seattle's undead denizens are all deliciously arch, devious and downright dangerous, and each conversation with the court's members becomes an elaborate dance as you try to suck all the information out without turning them into an enemy.

When I wasn't chatting, I found myself craving these social moments. Not just because the writing is sharp, playful and full of unspoken threats, but because some of the verbal jousting and heat-of-the-moment decision making gave me the same buzz as solving a puzzle.

There's only really one thing missing from the chatty, investigative side of *Bloodlines 2*, but it's a big one: there just aren't many RPG systems propping it up. For instance, your background, which you lay the foundation for early on and then keep adding bricks, rarely plays a role. I spotted a few references, and got a couple of unique dialogue options, but that was it.

Beyond your detective vision, there's also a lack of non-combat vampiric abilities. Your powers are more action-focused, and you don't get any of the skills or attributes you'd normally associate with an RPG. You'll never get smarter or

UNDEAD THREADS

What to wear during your trip to Seattle



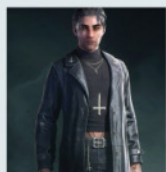
THE ELDER

Received when you unlock the third Toreador clan power, this is a classic look. Toreadors love being the centre of attention.



THE SHERIFF

The Banu Haqim's third outfit is perfect for a no-nonsense seeker of justice. The ideal uniform for your new job. And it's still pretty swish.



THE ATHEIST

The first Lasombra outfit is one for the hot goths. Let everyone know you think God's a scam while sporting a sexy midriff.

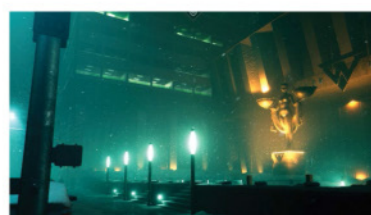
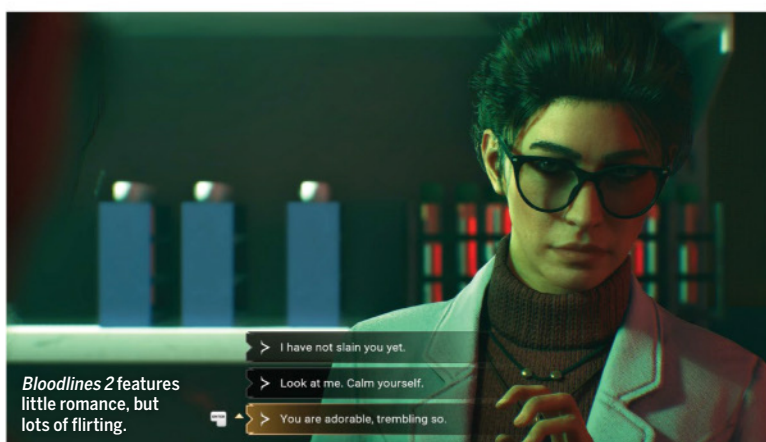
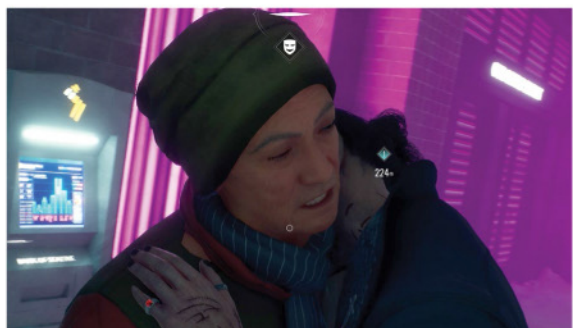


THE PRIEST

The final Lasombra outfit lets you cosplay as a priest. Perfect if you want someone to call you "Padre" before you drain them of blood.

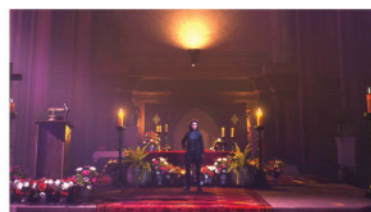


Welcome to
the juice bar.

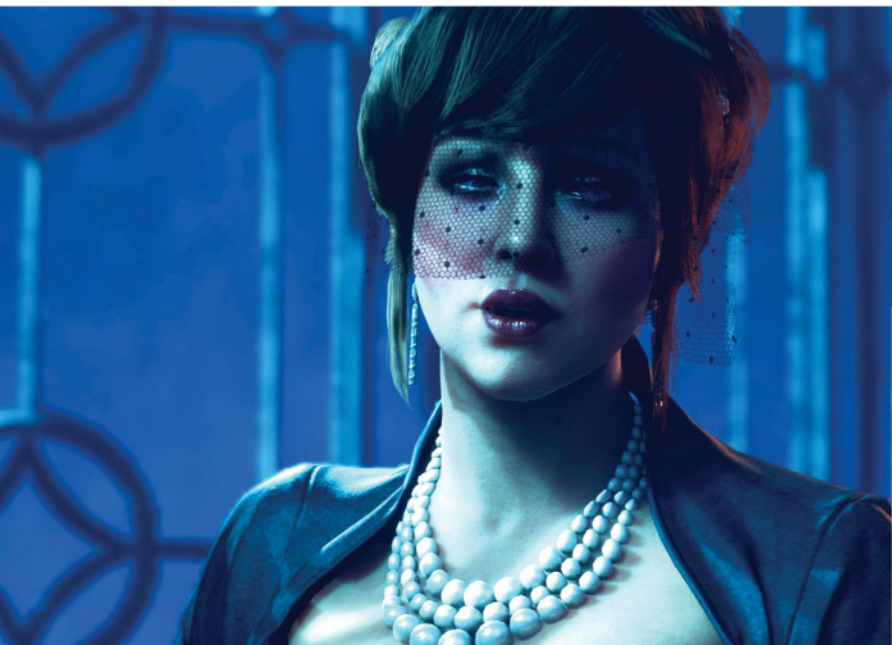


FAR LEFT: The streets of Seattle are filled with little snacks.

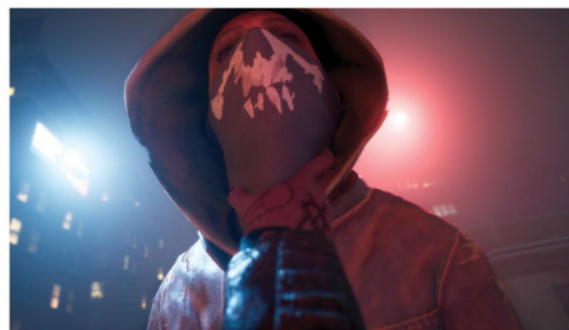
LEFT: Vampires, it turns out, are perfectly at home in churches.



Bloodlines 2 is a very pretty game most of the time.

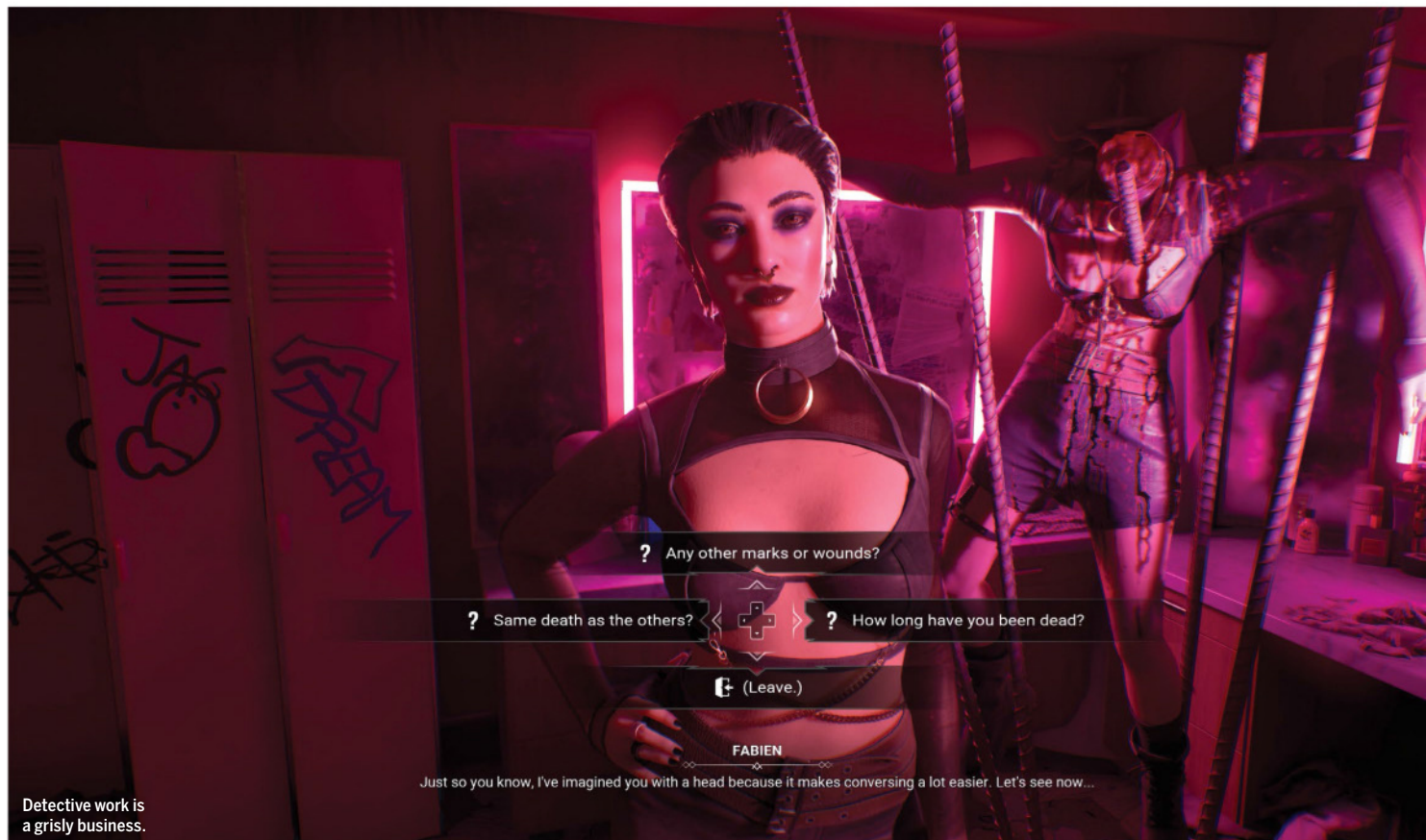
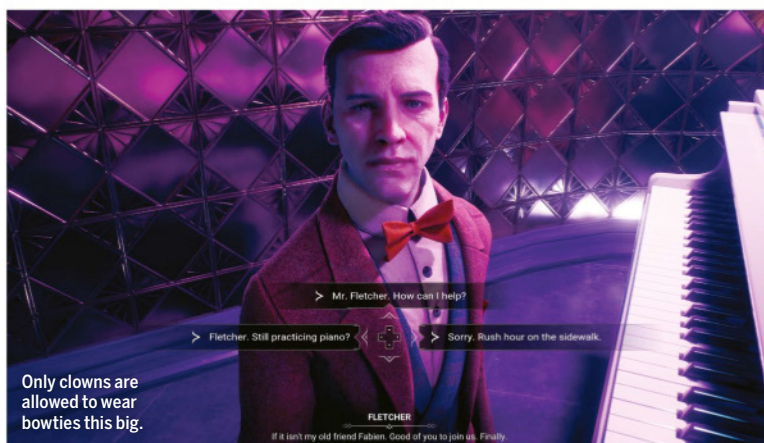
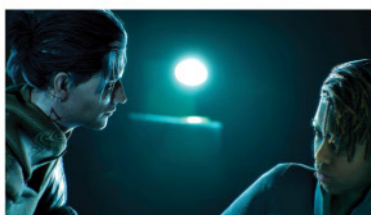


Lou has definitely killed people with her pearls.



RIGHT: There's a reason the Nosferatu tend to stay away from lights.

TOP RIGHT: Someone's going to be missing a throat in the morning.



more charismatic, and you'll never need to learn how to pick locks or hack computers.

Now, The Chinese Room has done a good job justifying this. You're an elder vampire who's lived for 400 years, and the events of *Bloodlines 2* take place over just a handful of nights. It might be weird if you got smarter suddenly, you can already smash most locks, and how's someone who's been asleep since 1920 going to figure out hacking?

But I still miss the flexibility and sense of character building that these features normally provide, and while *Bloodlines 2* works without them, it does make it feel like less of an RPG, less like I'm creating my own bespoke version of Phyre.

PULP FICTION

There is an exception to this, however, and his name is Fabien. See, when Phyre goes to sleep, Fabien's memories bubble to the surface. He's forgotten whole chunks of his unlife, but as Phyre hides from the rising sun, these lost moments return, and you can play through them. There's no combat, and you use your powers to interrogate witnesses, slip into places you shouldn't and get clues.

You'll jump between 1920 and 2024, just before Phyre's arrival. In both time periods, you're investigating a serial killer who's been hunting ghouls and vampires, decapitating them and hammering rebar into their bodies. We learn a lot about the court during these sections, how these undead movers and shakers manipulate the living, and Fabien's investigation is unsurprisingly tied to what's going on in the current day.

Bloodlines 2 is linear throughout, and you can only use Fabien's Malkavian powers at specific moments on specific people, so you're really being led through these sequences, but boy are they fun. My favourite power is the one that lets him read objects. See, the incredible insights Malkavians glean come with a cost: madness. In Fabien's case, it's poor impulse control, bad jokes, occasional befuddlement and talking to inanimate objects.

So when you try to get a read on an item, Fabien strikes up a conversation with it, bestowing the

item with a voice and a personality. And Fabien does all the voices himself. You'll chat to a death threat, a flirty filing cabinet and an unhelpful dead cat, to name but a few.

I'm a big fan of my version of Phyre, and I liked being a deadly hunter of naughty vamps, ghouls and occasionally humans, but I think I'd

give it all up to play a version of *Bloodlines 2* that was just Fabien running around solving crimes and not once killing anyone.

To be clear, *Bloodlines 2*'s combat is good. It just doesn't feel essential. It's certainly

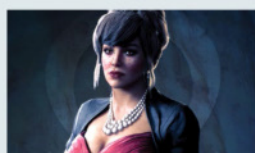
better than its predecessor's. Though I think, once again, some of the RPG elements will be missed. There are no stats to worry about, no gear or inventory management, no weapons. You're a 400-year-old killing machine who can decapitate multiple enemies with just your hand. And throughout the game, you'll unlock a wide variety of exotic powers.

After the first few hours, I'd unlocked all of the Banu Haqim powers, and really that's all you need. With all your clan powers remembered, you have a full loadout. Instead of getting more powerful, you make lateral moves into the skillsets of other clans. But you're always restricted to four active powers.

I liked being a deadly hunter of naughty vamps, ghouls and humans

FANG CONVENTION

Meet your colleagues



LOU

A madam and Ventrue vamp, Lou's Seattle's former prince, and she's a real historical figure.



RYONG

Ryong is a sensible pragmatist who appreciates straight-talkers. She's not got many friends.



TOLLY

Charismatic, witty and horribly disfigured by his clan's curse. He's also deadly.



BENNY

Benny's a dick.

STAY SKIPPY

This means the combat does start to outstay its welcome. I was having a great time mixing Banu Haqim and Tremere powers, along with liberal use of telekinesis, transforming me into a stealthy blood mage who could use enemies as blood bombs and then turn invisible to go for stealth kills. But by hour 20 I was using my stealth to skip any fights I could.

This is also why I eventually stopped doing sidequests, since a fight is the best you can hope for. Honestly, it's wild that a narrative-driven RPG could have such dreadful diversions. Sidequests are doled out by the leaders of the city's various clans, and here's everything they task you with doing: running to a random area to pick up a package, killing a human, killing a ghoul or finding collectibles. That's it!

It just seems like The Chinese Room felt it had to include sidequests, so it threw a series of incredibly low-effort ones into the mix. The same goes for the open world. Nighttime Seattle is dense in atmosphere and at times incredibly striking, but there's hardly anything to do in the city. I almost feel bad for complaining about open world bloat now, because if this is the alternative? Well, no thanks.

Anything not related to the main quest is simply not great. And that's a significant problem in an RPG – even one as brisk as this. *Bloodlines 2* features the best Vampire: The Masquerade story out of any of the videogame adaptations. It's a corker. And I probably will play through it again, even if the changes likely won't be all that dramatic. But the quest design and the character progression really hold it back.

This is a game that's been designed to be a narrative adventure game with a pulpy noir bent – not an RPG. This identity crisis means that it's always just a bit awkward, with The Chinese Room trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. But it's still a miracle that, after one of the most tumultuous creation stories I've ever encountered in gaming, it even exists. Let alone that it's good. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A gripping story full of intrigue and murder that struggles to find its footing as an RPG sequel.

78

A GAME OF TWO HALVES

EA SPORTS FC 26 is truly the beautiful game, but it makes plenty of tactical errors

By Jake Tucker

The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is true of many long-running franchises, but nowhere is it more obvious than with the annual footy fest. *EA Sports FC 26*, though, feels like a game finally willing to back up its yearly price tag. It doesn't rip everything up, but a series of smart changes and a few long-overdue tweaks make this the most confident, rewarding entry the series has had in years.

It's been a complicated couple of years for the sports game formally known as *FIFA*. EA Sports has been making football games since 1993's *FIFA International Soccer*, but FIFA and EA had a falling out in 2023 which led to EA striking out on its own with *EA Sports FC 24*. It was a strong entry, but felt incremental. *EA Sports FC 24* felt like a *FIFA* game, rather than a step forwards.

Fast forward a couple of years and *EA Sports FC* still feels like a *FIFA* game. If that irks you, you can stop reading now, it's OK; *FC 26* is a football game for better or worse and there's a good chance you'll already know whether you want to buy it. If you hate football, nothing here is going to convince you. Yet, *FC 26* knows what players want and delivers it with style. The pacing is

sharper, new and subtly improved animations give matches a real sense of weight, and the subtle tweaks across Career and Ultimate Team mean there's a lot here to pull eager fans back in. *FC 26*'s improvements still feel incremental, though, and the loss of the 3v3 Volta mode stings, but it's competently made – not quite a reinvention of the wheel, it's just polishing the hubcaps.

The most noticeable shift for the game is that there are two different types of football now. Competitive, which is the standard *FIFA*/*EA FC* style full of trick flicking and sweaty goals, and Authentic mode, which is slower and a bit more thoughtful.

Switching the dial to Authentic reshapes the game with a few new features that are specifically called out: more life-like defending from AI

Knows what players want and delivers it with style

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
EA's yearly football monolith returns

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
EA Canada

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ea.com/en/games/ea-sports-fc/fc-26

teammates, re-tuned pacing of skill moves, authentic player reactions to in-game situations, increased influence of physics on ball movement, and realistic impact of fatigue on performance. In play, the key thing to take away is that when you're kicking about in Authentic mode the game slows right down and you have to think a bit smarter to get the win. There's less sprinting, a bit more of a focus on positioning and occasionally players will just make an error, looking a bit wobbly.

COMPETITIVE PLAY

I'm pretty average at *EA Sports FC* and I was pretty average at *FIFA* before that, but in Competitive mode scoring against the AI is as easy as running it toward the goal, flicking the stick to roll the ball to the side and then tapping it past the keeper.

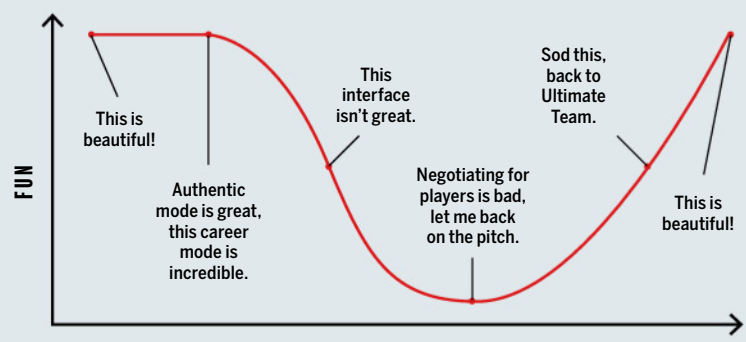
In Authentic, it can often be a more realistic scoreline, scoring a goal or two, and I actually thought the six-minute matches that have long been the default for EA's football games were a little too short, with three minutes for each half barely leaving me with enough time for a proper attack. As a result, most matches would end in mere 1-0 and 2-0 scores instead of the 10-0 drubbings I was handing out in the game's Competitive mode.

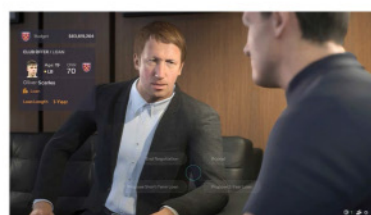
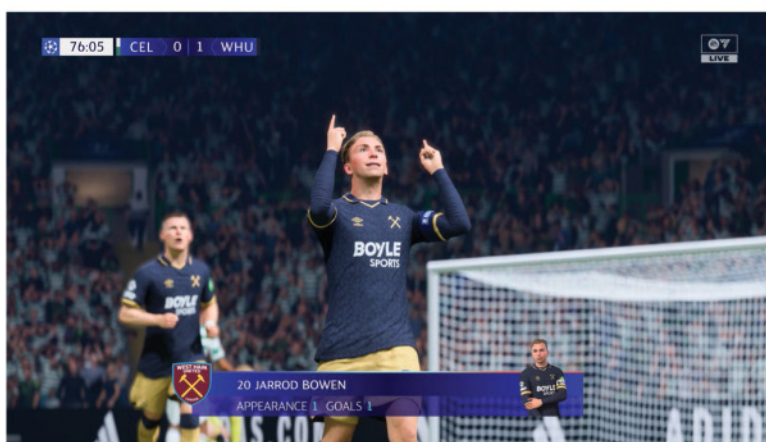
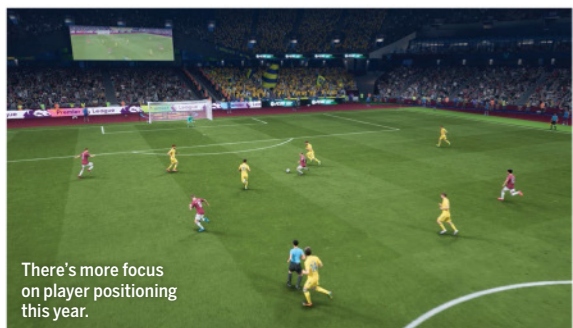
The matches I've played with Authentic are pulse-pounding – it feels like a truly revolutionary step from a series that, if I'm honest, hasn't done too much in the way of innovation over the last few years. This is closer pace-wise to the old *Pro Evolution Soccer* games, and it makes an attacking build-up so rewarding it feels like the best way to play against the AI.

The catch is that Authentic can only be played in the singleplayer matches like Kick Off and the career modes. Ultimate Team and the other online offerings can only be played with the Competitive preset. This sucks for Ultimate Team's club

90 MINUTES

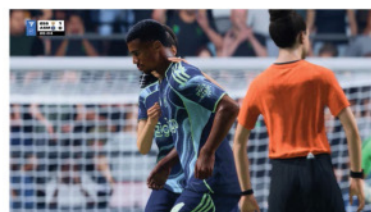
Inside my first hour and a half with *FC 26*





ABOVE: Musiala attempts to muscle his way to victory.

LEFT: Potter was sacked shortly after this meeting due to that haircut.



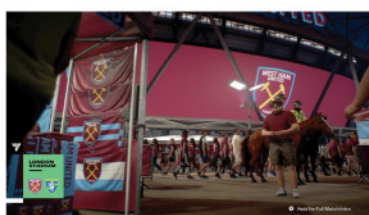


Ice cold Cole really should buy a jumper.



BELOW RIGHT: Haaland was not impressed with Rodri's love of console gaming.

BELOW: Yes, there are player and ref cams. And yes, they remain naff and unneeded.



Fans in the Bernabéu celebrate.



POV CAMERA

⚡ battles, because you can only play it in Competitive. I like the slower, sim-y pace of Authentic, and it's a shame that after offering it up to players EA is hiding it away.

Regardless, these two different presets exist side by side and it seems like EA has finally come up with a way to relentlessly poke and prod the competitive side of the game for the hardcore players while preserving a more chill experience for those that just want to play the career modes. We'll see how it goes. In the time since I started reviewing the game a patch has dropped changing the way defenders react and tweaking how players move with the ball. These patches will continue throughout the year, so the EA FC 26 that you can play online in six months is going to be different to the one you can play now.

Competitive mode is similar enough to previous games that it doesn't feel worth examining to the same degree. However, I do want to call out that the AI of both your team and their opponents is significantly smarter. When defending, the squad holds its tactical shape a lot better; when pushing forwards, there was always an attacker ready for my pass as I moved up; and goalkeepers collect balls efficiently. In both styles of play, movement feels fluid and responsive with the ball stuck to your feet until you clatter into a defender. In Competitive you can really take advantage of this, clamping down on the trigger to sprint and bypassing the enemy team with ease.

MICRO MANAGEMENT

Sadly, while the football really is tremendous, FC 26 doesn't quite stick the landing when it comes to the Manager mode. There's a lot of new content here: the live manager hub asks you to achieve some pretty lofty historical challenges to win new kits and the classic mode feels fully fleshed out, but it's very lightweight and, sorry but it's true, quite annoying to play when you're off the pitch.

Fortunately, there's some pleasing randomness here: a training injury ruled out both my goalkeeper Areola and defender Kyle Walker-Peters before a key game, leaving me to rely on my terrible back-up keeper. The

only way to avoid getting battered was to ensure the ball never made it near the net and so we parked the bus to leave my amateur goaltender unbothered and in his lane.

But, the user interface is seriously lacking. Reading that email in the game's Manager career mode was infuriating, as you try to navigate an in-game email client with sticks and triggers instead of the mouse and keyboard sitting right in front of you. Try to play the game on your keyboard, which I'd advise heavily against, and you get to the home

screen of the career not by clicking on the giant home icon but by pressing the W key.

I can forgive FC 26 a lot of these errors just because of how good it looks. From the pre-match introductions all the way to on-pitch overlays, playing FC 26 feels like you're watching a cohesive TV broadcast. Getting stuck into a season full of West Ham matches means I got to see the digitised London Stadium a whole bunch, and it feels just like the real deal.

Animations look good, but there are some weird face captures: I chose to play as Graham Potter and FC 26's weird little homunculus version of the man will haunt my dreams forever – but it doesn't need to look like real life, it just captures the vibe.

Doesn't quite stick the landing when it comes to the Manager mode

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Some of the best ways to kick a virtual ball



PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2 2002

This never made it to the PC, but it's the best in its genre.



ACTUA SOCCER 1995

Actua Soccer was once viewed as a contender to PES and FIFA.



SENSIBLE WORLD OF SOCCER 1992

Fans of a certain age will get misty eyed at the nostalgia.



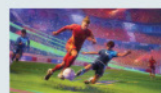
ROCKET LEAGUE 2015

The football is twice the size of the players and the players are all cars.



RED CARD 2002

Red Card is a football game with the rules massively relaxed.



REMATCH 2015

Built in Sifu's engine, Slocap's multiplayer is all about tight 5v5 matches.

ULTIMATE POWER

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the game seems designed to funnel you towards Ultimate Team. If you're unfamiliar with Ultimate Team, it's basically the football-themed Pachinko machine that is the equivalent of the Panini sticker books of my youth – except they release new stickers every single week and you can never fill the book.

Ultimate Team is gambling, it's always been gambling, but despite the fact gamers have now agreed that we don't like loot boxes, it's always gotten a pass. It's better here than it used to be: I've gotten a few kick-ass players without spending a penny, but the spectre of pay to win – the idea that you could have a better team and potentially win more matches if you were only willing to cough up a little cash – is ever present and refuses to be exorcised. It's less grindy this year, you'll get rewards faster, but the flip side is that in an attempt to flatten the power curve those rewards are actually a little worse, meaning if you want to have the best time possible in the shortest timeframe, it's still worth dropping some cash.

Play Ultimate Team and you should expect weird and wonderful kits and a pace of play more similar to basketball as stamina just doesn't seem to have any impact whatsoever. It's fast and frantic and honestly pretty good fun, but it's nonsensical, with the end of each match being a welcome breather as you can take a second to recover from the pressure.

There's plenty of game here, too much to fit into one review, but I tend to grimace whenever I have to do anything except play football because everything takes too long and makes you faff too much. But outside of its wonky menu UI, FC 26 feels like the strongest evolutionary step EA has taken with its big franchise in years. It's still football, but it's the beautiful game at its best. Great graphics, good improvements and the bold step of splitting the entire game in two to try and appease two different fanbases has made FC 26 feel like a contender. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Truly the beautiful game has never looked better, but whenever you're not actually kicking a ball, inefficiencies soon arise.

77

BETTER THAN EVER

Too many red spider lilies in **SILENT HILL F** is not a good thing

By Elie Gould

Silent Hill f isn't some spin-off or experiment for Konami to indoctrinate its players into performing perfect dodges – it's the next step for the iconic horror series. Watching as the fog settled on Ebisugaoka, I felt the same pit in my stomach that I experienced back when I stumbled across Silent Hill as I searched for Cheryl. *Silent Hill f* may leave behind that old rural town, but it has more in common with previous games than just its title.

The new protagonist, Shimizu Hinako is at a crossroads in her life. Just finished with school, she faces pressure from her parents to settle down and get married like her older sister. But she's plagued by the fears of heading down a path that broke her mother and sent her sister off somewhere far away. Fears of what has happened, but crucially what may come to pass, is what haunts Hinako's journey through *Silent Hill f*.

James Sunderland undoubtedly left big shoes to fill, so it's no small task taking on the mantle of Silent Hill protagonist, but Hinako does it effortlessly. Her character is vulnerable, strong, stubborn and caring throughout the game, making it easy to sympathise and like her.

VILLAGE PEOPLE

Hinako's journey through the isolated mountain village of Ebisugaoka carries on the themes of *Silent Hill*. The layout of the town makes for some fantastic exploration as you wander around on your lonesome, squeezing through small gaps between houses and puzzling together new ways to traverse the many roadblocks which will complicate the map.

I'm something of a magpie when it comes to map exploration in that I have to sweep through every section, picking up anything that catches my eye. It's a trait that helped and hindered me during my playthrough as some items are better left alone.

Konami and NeoBards have also made no secret of how *Silent Hill f*

does tread new ground. A few months ago, *Silent Hill* producer Motoi Okamoto revealed that there would be more combat and action woven into *Silent Hill f*, striking fear into the hearts of fans.

But *Silent Hill f* isn't much of a Soulslike, and while there are ways in which players can enjoy a more fighting-focused experience if you pick a more action-oriented difficulty like Hard or Lost in the Fog, it still has none of the qualities which make Soulslikes, such as boss runbacks or weird NPCs that speak in tongues and then whip out a club to bonk you on the head.

During my first run-through, I fought everything I could

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An action-adventure horror game set in 1960s Japan, full of horrific monsters and puzzles that are somehow even scarier

EXPECT TO PAY

£70

DEVELOPER

NeoBards Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Konami

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 5 5600G, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

steam.pm/app/2947440

If you play on the easiest setting, Story Mode, which I did, combat is far from the core experience, even with the counter and dodge mechanics. During my first run-through, I fought everything I could see out of pure fear and panic. It wasn't until halfway through that I realised I didn't have to face up against every bloody mannequin or twisted version of Lickitung.

So, as I walked into Ebisugaoka for the second time, I made a decision to take the cowardly option, like I'd pick in most horror games, and to just run and hide from all the monsters, and it worked like a charm.

SHORT LINES OF SIGHT

Enemies in *Silent Hill f* have quite short lines of sight, meaning turning a corner was almost always good enough to get them off my back. This turned my experience from one in which I was blindly swinging a pipe around to something slightly more thoughtful. I plotted out my route on the map, crept around corners, solved puzzles and explored every inch of the map, all while going by undetected.

In doing this, I quickly got used to the dodge mechanic, which refills your stamina bar if you're able to pull off a perfect dodge. Utilising this, I managed to get through the story from start to finish without breaking any of my weapons pretty effortlessly.

Silent Hill f is a true return to form. A game that not only can stand proudly shoulder to shoulder with other Goliaths in the series, but one that is brave enough to take risks and deploy changes to set the groundwork for what I hope to be the new standard of *Silent Hill* games going forward. ■

NIFTY CHARMS

The best omamori you can find



CLAM
Decreases enemy line of sight.



WHALE
You can't be interrupted by a hit while healing.



CROW
Slightly restores health after each enemy defeated.



SPIDER
Greatly decreases weapon durability consumption.



SUZURAN
Perfect dodges become easier to perform.



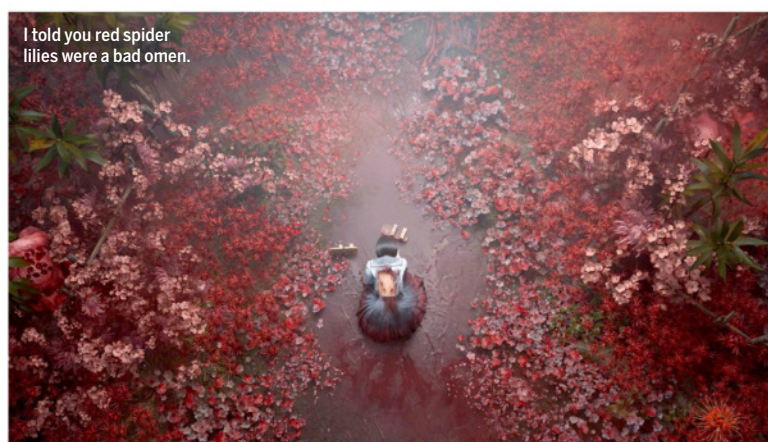
GOAT
Take less damage when facing multiple enemies.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Proves that the horrors of *Silent Hill* aren't, and shouldn't be, restricted to the iconic American mountain town.

90



ABOVE: I'm going to lose this staring contest.

LEFT: How I feel trying to solve puzzles.



Oh god, that's just awful.

CLASS WARFARE

After languishing in Call of Duty's shadow, **BATTLEFIELD 6** now has all the juice

By Morgan Park

It says something about the state of the FPS that the hype for *Battlefield 6* is mostly down to the old, not the new. Here we are, howling at the moon for decades-old modes, 'grounded' character models, classic class setups and a map from 2011. Series vets are gobbling up this sequel as if we haven't eaten for weeks while patting Dice on the back for managing to execute a normal *Battlefield* game.

Dice's last effort tanked expectations, but that's not why *Battlefield 6* has impressed me. It's the wider multiplayer culture of 2025 – wrung out by years of battle royale banality and meta-pilled ranked modes – that created the conditions for an ordinary *Battlefield* to be the most exciting FPS of the year.

Place your palm on the pavement, and you can feel the low rumble of a hobby yearning for what we loved 15 years ago: the spectacle of scale, the unserious chaos of vehicular warfare, red grunts vs blue grunts, the permission to make your own rules and an environment where the guy obsessed with metas is having the least fun. That is the pitch of *Battlefield 6*, and it's a bullseye.

At least, a bullseye where it matters most. *Battlefield 6* multiplayer gets two big thumbs up, with caveats. A 64-player round of Conquest remains a spiritual experience that no other series can touch. My body vibrates with anticipation every time I spawn into a chopper in the heat of battle, hit the deck to revive a squadmate in a smokecloud, or nail a 100-metre headshot from the safety of a mountain perch.

A round of Conquest remains a spiritual experience

Those are all best experienced on Mirak Valley, the biggest and best map at launch, but as many worried would be the case after the open beta, the rest of the map pool can't measure up. The *Halo* Forge-like Portal mode feels like a first draft. Attachments are boring,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The next mainline *Battlefield* with a full campaign and large-scale multiplayer

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Battlefield Studios

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 5090

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 64 players

STEAM DECK
Unsupported

LINK
ea.com/en/games/battlefield/battlefield-6

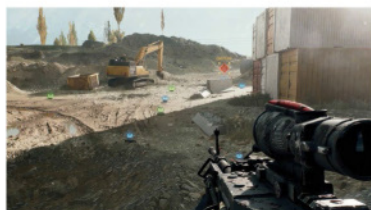
progression is too slow, and lots of guns are locked behind grindy challenges. They're thorns in the side of what's otherwise the most fun I've had with a multiplayer FPS in years.

GOOD TO BE BACK

The greatest compliment I can pay to *Battlefield 6* is that it's the only game I want to play right now. I wake up in the morning and play through the previous night's highlights in my head – the unlikely revives, the tank runs, the 30-minute rounds that came down to a handful of tickets.

It's a game where a single 25-minute round can spawn a dozen storylines: two ace pilots duelling over control of the skies, the slippery engineer who makes tank drivers' lives a living hell, the squad dedicated to locking down a single flag no matter what, the guy who keeps driving the EOD bot around desperate to torch someone (anyone!) to death. *Battlefield 6* confidently hands players a sandbox and lets us find our own fun.

Balance is imperfect, of course, but not ruinous. Tanks are too flimsy against engineers packing three-to-five RPGs in their pockets, and I



TOP: Note to self: never drive on roads.





ABOVE: Sometimes you just gotta get away from the noise and have fun with the blowtorch.



submit that 'land mine spam' is getting out of hand. But largely, the sacred infantry-armour-air hierarchy is as considered as you'd hope after 20 years of these games: tanks bully infantry, helicopters bully tanks, jets bully everyone, and infantry are persistent little roaches that are easy to squash individually, but impossible to rid yourself of completely.

GUN SHOW

If *Battlefield 6*'s best quality is that it's a lot like older *Battlefields*, the upgrade that justifies the new package is its gunplay. Gone are the moments in *Battlefield 2042* where aiming directly at an enemy resulted in bullets landing just behind them – *Battlefield 6*'s guns are loud machines with quick ballistics.

The renewed emphasis on punchy, reactive firefights in close quarters is part of a larger *Battlefield 6* aim to out-*Call of Duty* Activision. EA is trying very hard to bring a new audience into the fold – so hard that some of *Battlefield 6*'s design changes come off as bending over backwards to lure a type of player who expects a billion guns, hundreds of hours of grind, and smaller maps. *Battlefield 6* has *Call of Duty*'s Gunsmith, its gunplay, its firing range and its vehicle-less modes.

Some changes are ultimately wins, but with others, Battlefield Studios has stumbled into the same bad habits. *Battlefield* has inherited *CoD*'s

I unlocked the gun that's out of focus (or it's just a bug).



MEET YOUR COWORKERS

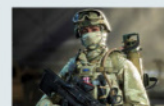
How classes have changed in Battlefield 6



ASSAULT
Signature Weapon: Assault rifle
Primary gadget: Adrenaline injector
Gadgets: Spawn beacon, grenade launcher, assault ladder. Assaults are the frontline bruisers.



ENGINEER
Signature weapon: SMG
Primary gadget: Repair torch
Gadgets: RPG, anti-tank mine, anti-air launcher. Engineer is the class best suited to take on armour.

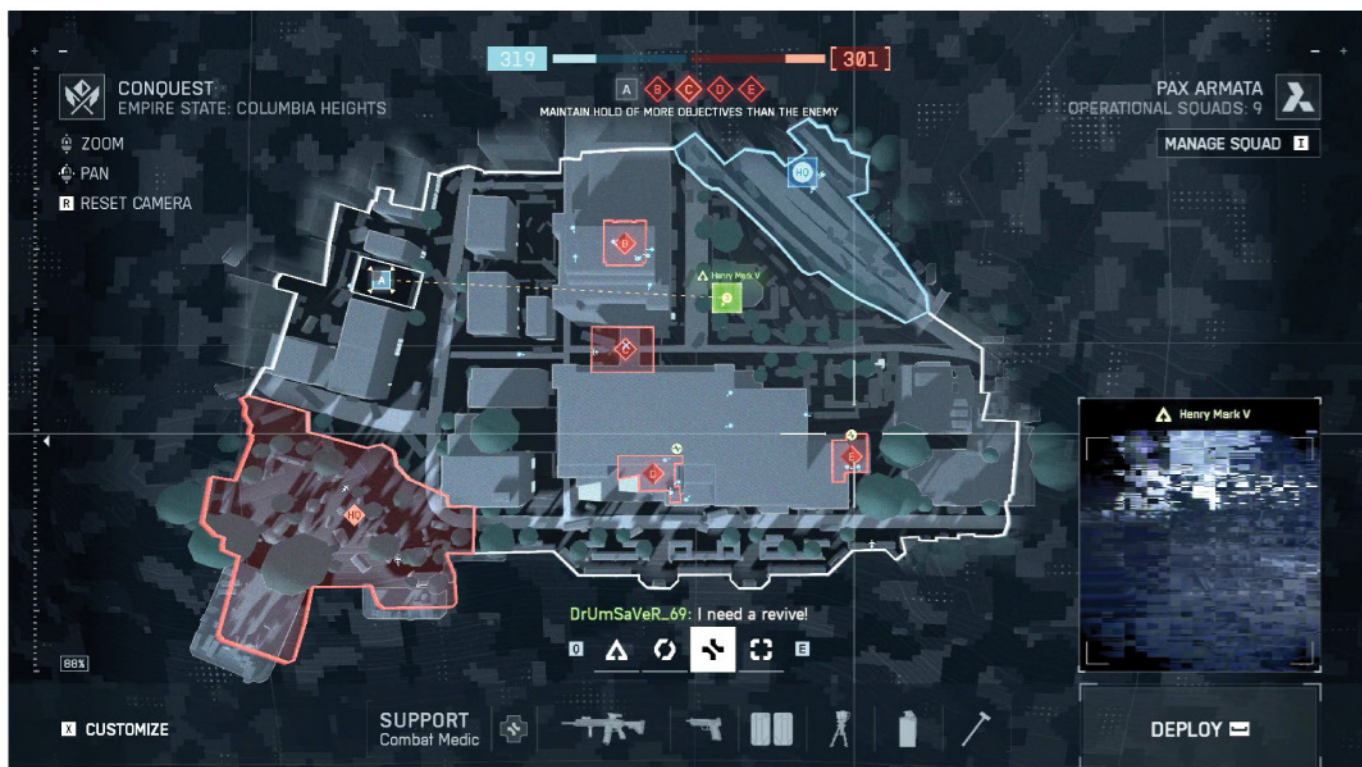


SUPPORT
Signature weapon: LMG
Primary gadget: Supply bag
Gadgets: Defibrillator, portal cover, grenade net. Support combines the medic and ammo mule duties into one.



RECON
Signature weapon: Sniper rifles
Primary gadget: Motion detector
Gadgets: C4, target designator, decoy. Recons are the only class able to accurately wield sniper rifles.





‘every assault rifle is kind of the same’ problem. The attachments themselves are boring: grips that lower recoil, muzzles that lower recoil, lasers that lower spread, stocks that lower recoil and a dozen scopes.

It’s an indictment of the whole system that vehicle customisation is way more interesting despite fewer options. I can equip tanks with other types of rockets with different specialties (air-controlled, manual, lock-on) and make a tough choice about which support tool is best – the smoke that also counters lock-on missiles is clutch, though a self-repair is arguably better for survival.

Battlefield 6’s progression is slow. The first 20 levels are particularly gruelling as you unlock gadgets and guns one rank at a time, unable to focus on your preferred class’ gear. That changes at rank 20, but also gets annoying in a new way: some guns and gadgets are tied to class-specific challenges that range from totally broken to mind-meltingly tedious.

TOP: Empire State is around the median size of *BF6* maps.

ABOVE: At launch, the anticipated server browser is mostly just people farming XP.

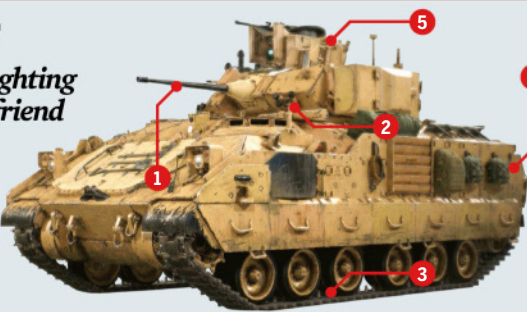
FAR LEFT: *Battlefield 6* is full of so many delectable explosions.

ARMOUR UP

The Infantry Fighting Vehicle is your friend

1 MAIN CANNON
Rapid fires small explosive rounds perfect for reaching out to infantry.

2 MISSILE POD
Can equip aim-guided rockets and lock-in missiles.



3 TREADS
If damaged, the IFV will be immobile for a few seconds.

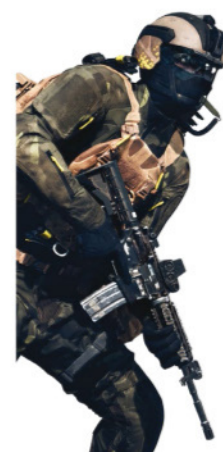
4 TANK REAR
The gap in the IFV’s armour. Protect at all costs.

5 TURRET
Heavy or light machine gun operated by a second player.

BATTLE FIELDS

Mirak Valley, New Sobek City and Operation Firestorm deliver the wider battlefields I craved in the open beta. I have qualms (especially with Sobek’s restrictive boundaries and bad spawns), but in Mirak and Firestorm especially, Dice flaunts its mastery of the format it created.

They’re slick, gorgeous landscapes with all the ingredients that make a



map click – urban cover, rolling hills, open skies, room to breathe – while managing to feel natural and lived-in. Dice's spaces stand in contrast to the maps offered in the *Call of Duty: Black Ops 7* beta, whose strict three-lane structure makes every match feel like the same sitcom set with slightly different furniture.

The problem is that there isn't enough peak *Battlefield* in *Battlefield 6*. The launch map pool of nine is overstuffed with offerings that have fewer vehicles and bottlenecks that guarantee you'll either kill or be killed every ten seconds.

THINKING WITH PORTAL

At the top of my list of 'disappointments that will probably get better at some point' is the server browser, initially billed as a convenient tool that lets us play *Battlefield 6* however we want. The reality has been the opposite:

nobody has been able to create new custom servers because of a 'global server quota' caused, in part, by people grinding XP in bot matches.

The light at the end of the community tab's grim tunnel is Portal, *Battlefield 6*'s evolved toolset for modifying maps, creating game modes and publishing them for anyone to play. In a surprising move for a 2025 videogame, the Portal editor comes packaged as a branch of the open-source Godot game engine, complete with all the map files and assets needed to, for instance,

recreate *Call of Duty 4*'s Shipment within a day, make a floating parkour course, or a zombie survival mode. While *Battlefield 6*'s discoverability tools are a mess, the potential of Portal itself is unbelievable.

Dice kept saying that *Battlefield 6* is obsessively optimised, and by golly, it meant it. In a time when PC performance standards have taken a nosedive, it's remarkable that an FPS that looks this good also runs this effortlessly. Much like *Call of Duty*, you can fire up *Battlefield 6* and get by on whatever it defaults to.

I split my play time between two machines at 1080p (my monitors need some updating): one running an

aging 2080 Super/i9 9900KS and another with a 5090/Ryzen 7 9800X3D. Both ran *Battlefield 6* like a dream, and I was surprised at how subtle the improvements were at ultra vs medium presets. It's

hard to make this game look bad no matter how you slice it, a feat accomplished by foregoing tech like ray tracing and global illumination that tend to create more problems.

CAMPAINED OUT

It took me almost two weeks to complete *Battlefield 6*'s campaign, not because it's long or particularly challenging, but because every mission is about as fun as chipping a tooth. I had low expectations for the pillar of *Battlefield 6* that reportedly suffered the shakiest development

period, but I still hoped for more. Instead of thinking long and hard about how to harness *Battlefield*'s special ingredients – classes, big spaces, destruction, vehicles – into a singleplayer context, Battlefield Studios instead opted to copy *Modern Warfare*'s homework.

The adventures of spec ops unit Dagger13 play out in a gauntlet of linear, placid run-ins with Pax Armata goons broken up by the drywall chatter of battle buddies who will never be Captain Price no matter how hard they try. If you're one of people eyeing *Battlefield 6* for its campaign, I suggest you run.

NEXT GEN

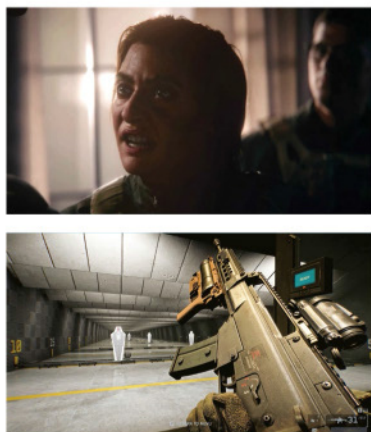
But *Battlefield* is a shared pastime at its core, and grading on that curve, *Battlefield 6* is an imperfect success. It isn't especially innovative or surprising if you've been here a while, but its refinements in gunplay are a major leap for a series that's lagged behind where it matters most.

Battlefield 6 is also the strongest piece of evidence yet that the casual FPS is cool again – people want to curate, create and modify their fun. They want community more than competition. *Battlefield 6* understands that the best FPS is a place, not just a service. The execution isn't perfect, but the heart is there. ■

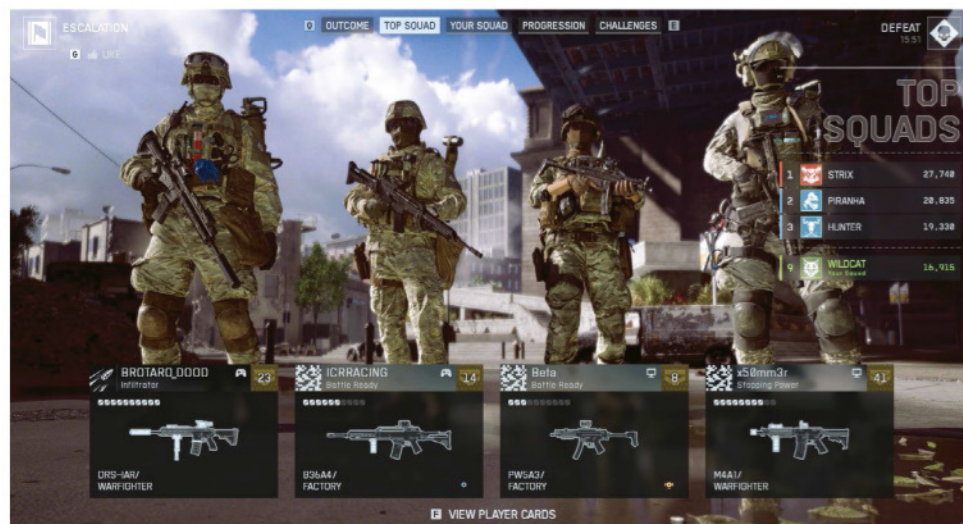
PC GAMER VERDICT

Battlefield 6 is more about refinements, but a well-made *Battlefield* is still one of the best shooters of the year.

82



TOP: *Battlefield 6*'s campaign is mostly people yelling at each other for reasons you're not entirely certain about.



GODLIKE

HADES II is a killer roguelike action RPG with satisfying layers of creativity

By Tyler Colp

Hades II almost had me questioning Supergiant's decision to make its first sequel. I loved *Hades*, which brought all of the studio's past experience to bear on a killer action game for the roguelike curious, but I wasn't convinced a sequel would be a better follow-up than whatever new idea for a game Supergiant could come up with next.

It took some time, but *Hades II* convinced me it was worth it. It's a sequel worthy of the title that expands but doesn't diminish what made the first game great. I did like aspects of *Hades II* when it launched into Early Access.

Protagonist Melinoë's magical array of attacks were more immediately satisfying than Zagreus' at the start, and the new cast of characters, such as Hecate and Nemesis, gave it a sharper, darker tone.

I just couldn't get over how tedious it was. Because of its new crafting system, I had to mine ore and pick flowers on every run as if the gripping combat and intricate buildcrafting would bore me. To my dismay, I had the same issue starting up the 1.0 version of *Hades II*. I was so worried about collecting enough silver to craft a shovel to collect some other resource that I couldn't enjoy the meat of the game. The first several hours are like playing a survival game where every major feature is locked behind a recipe, or in this case, a bubbling Incantation. Eventually, however, the table-setting stops and *Hades II* finally, finally becomes the game I didn't know I was waiting for.

A FOUNTAIN OF CHOICES

If *Hades I* is the entry level course, *Hades II* is the advanced course. While it may be 'more *Hades*', it's more *Hades* in a way that dissolved my doubts and doesn't just retread the original game.

Both games share the same basic structure: they're 2D action games where you're a brooding Greek god

fighting your way through rooms of monsters choosing random upgrades and rewards to help you slay each area's final boss. Unlike *Hades I*, progress in *Hades II* heavily relies on collecting reagents to cook up

Incantations in the game's shadowy hub, the Crossroads.

Hades II's virtues start with Melinoë, who is exceptionally more fun to play than Zagreus – and that's with all respect to Zagreus and the joy

I had playing as him in *Hades I*. The princess of the Underworld has him beat with an additional layer to every normal attack that imbues them with magic. This opens up more ways to augment her skills with the powers of the gods you meet on your way. It also forms the foundation for the larger scope of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike action RPG with a cast of Greek gods and goddesses

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Supergiant Games

PUBLISHER
Supergiant Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 5090

STEAM DECK
Verified

LINK
steam.pm/
app/1145350/

the game, particularly when it comes to the dangers you face.

COMBINATIONS

There are more combinations of powers than I could ever possibly wrap my head around in *Hades II*. I'm usually fond of the Sister Blades for their rapid stabs that ignite enemies with Hestia's boon, but sometimes I want a big heavy axe that cleaves through bosses so I can hear the metallic clink of Hephaestus' hammer when it hits twice.

In one of my last runs, I drew enemies into a heart-shaped rune from Aphrodite and fried them with skulls charged by uncle Zeus. Ever since then I've been wondering what might happen if I clumped enemies up and used the quakes from the axe's magic-infused heavy attack instead. The only thing keeping the number of possible combinations from being overwhelming is knowing *Hades II* rarely disappoints you no matter how experimental you want to get.

RABBIT HOLES

That is ultimately *Hades II*'s greatest strength and why its crafting-heavy intro – as bad as it is – couldn't keep me from liking it. I learned pretty quickly that the first rule of *Hades II* is to be willing to take risks.

Over and over again you will be forced to dump materials into Incantations with few clues on what it'll result in. You might conjure up an overflowing spa to rest at in Oceanus or invite a character into the game's central hub area who lets you in on the secret to surviving the suffocating atmosphere of the surface world. *Hades II* frequently stalls out until you've taken a chance on something you haven't before, which can be confusing and even a little frustrating when you've gone on three or four runs and the world remains frozen in the same state as when you started.

As soon as you take a leap of faith and craft everything you can though,

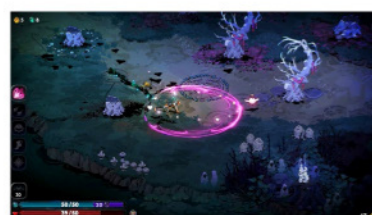
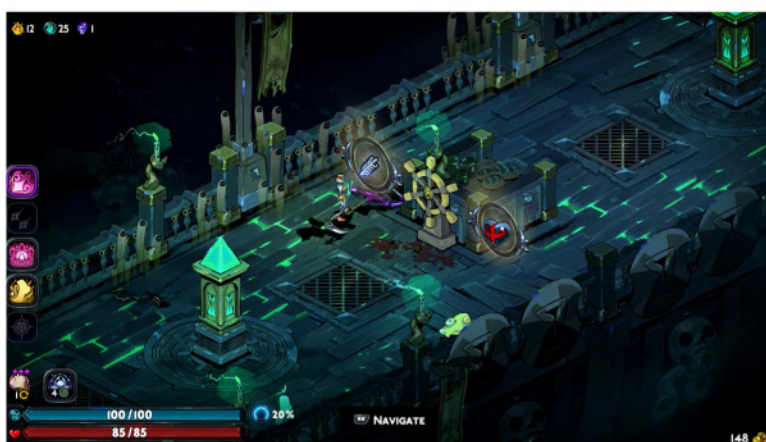
HOLDING OUT FOR AN ANTIHERO

Meet the protagonist of *Hades II*

Melinoë, the offspring of Hades and Persephone, is the Princess of the Underworld and the younger sister of Zagreus, the protagonist of the original *Hades*. When the titan Chronos breaks free from imprisonment in Tartarus and takes over the Underworld, Melinoë must venture forth to defeat Chronos and reclaim her birthright.



The combo of powers available is impressive.

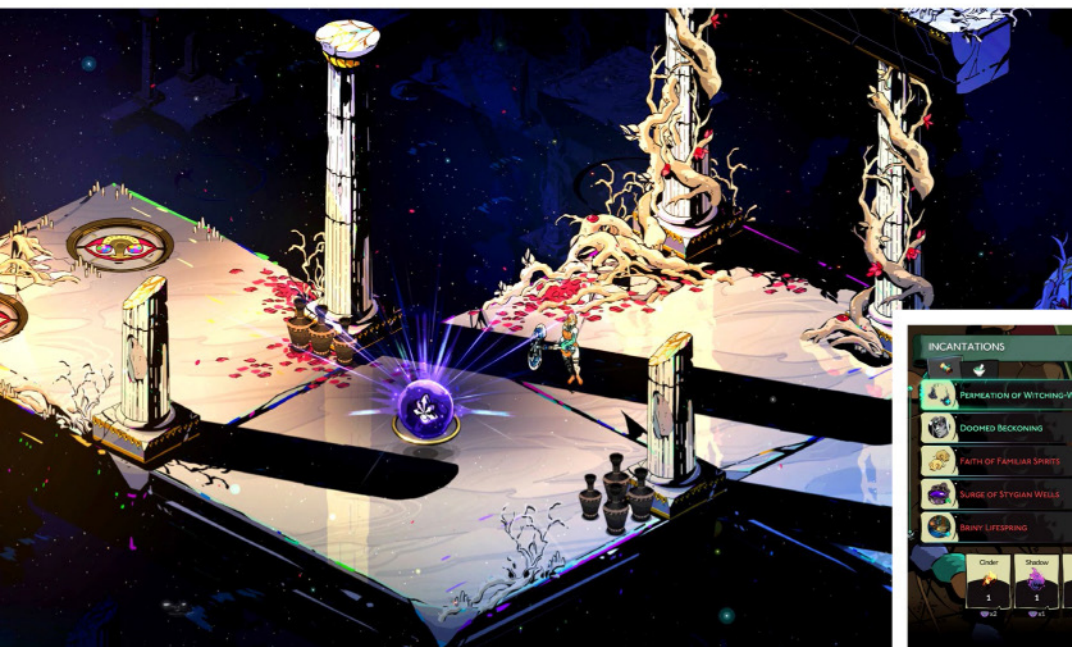


FAR LEFT: Welcome to the ship of the damned... damned good looking, that is.

BOTTOM LEFT: The gods of *Hades II* provide you beneficial boons that aid you in your quest.

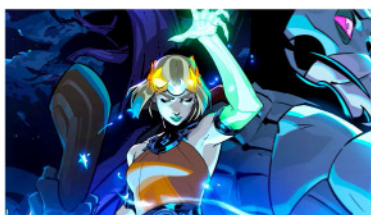
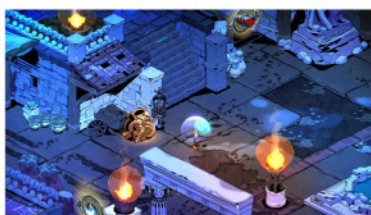


These guys are totally cooked.



ABOVE: As in *Hades*, the art style remains full of flavour.

BELOW: Controlling the battlefield, especially later on in the game, is key.



☞ *Hades II* opens up and guides you through its incredible web of systems. I was often juggling multiple goals at once, which was a welcome reprieve from the restrictive opening hours. And once I had access to a full deck of Arcana Cards and Keepsakes, which give you passive bonuses like extra health and guarantee boons from specific gods, I no longer felt like I was on a grind for one more chunk of marble to craft the next thing.

Hades II reminded me a lot of *Path of Exile*'s endgame where you juice up maps with specific modifiers that benefit you before going in. But here the modifiers aren't just numerical bonuses that affect the enemies you'll face, they're opportunities to sample parts of the game you might've overlooked.

I ignored *Hades II*'s new Hex attacks until I unlocked the Unseen card that passively regenerates magic. I set up a run purely based around magic attacks, selecting cards that increased their damage and slowed down time as I charged them up. The brawl against the sirens rock band (stream I Am Gonna Claw (Out Your Eyes then Drown You to Death) right now) had never been easier as I spun my axe into a whirlwind and used my Hex to summon one of the dead members to fight for me. And because it's still a *Hades* game where

even your smallest decisions have narrative consequences, my strategy irritated the frontwoman enough for her to comment on it in the next run.

SYSTEM STACKING

With all these systems stacked on top of each other, it's true that *Hades II* is fussier than the elegantly

simple original. You have several different weapons, Arcana Cards, Keepsakes and animal familiars to choose before you step foot into a run. But except in the first couple hours, *Hades II* never fails

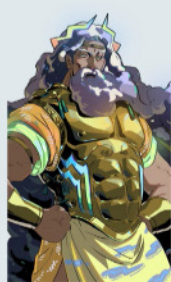
to deliver adequate rewards for fussing with its systems.

When I'm not chasing down new boons to play around with or practicing a tough boss fight, I'm feasting on whatever rumours and tales the gods have to tell me. After clearing out a room, I was often torn between picking a boon I knew would enhance my build over a boon that would let me hear more from some of my favourites. I always took the opportunity to check in on Narcissus while he stares at his own reflection in Oceanus, or to hear what Demeter remembers about Melinoë's parents. It's easy to get lost in the wealth of conversations with Supergiant's eclectic vision of the characters and completely forget you have a build to perfect.

Hades II never fails to deliver rewards for fussing with its systems

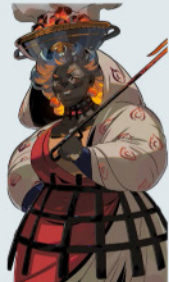
PANTHEON OF POWER

Some of *Hades II*'s most useful deities



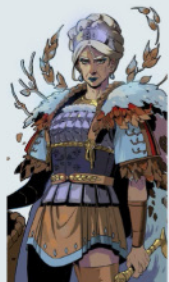
ZEUS

Lightning bolts on your cast, lightning bolts on your rushes, lightning bolts when you hit enemies, lightning bolts when they hit you.



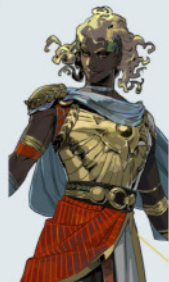
HESTIA

Goddess of Flame and Hearth and grandma. Provider of a solid dodge-chance buff I always snap up if I've got a burn build going.



DEMETER

Hades II is a fast game, so any time I get to slow things down is a blessing – Demeter's freeze statuses always help me cool off.



APOLLO

It makes sense that Apollo's boons harmonise with the other gods; I like his Solar Ring, which synergises with a ton of cast boons.

I don't think I'm anywhere close to reaching the bottom of what *Hades II* has to offer. I wasn't ready for it to have what is effectively an action RPG-like endgame with the Surface, an entirely separate pool of areas that demand a level of mastery I'm still trying to survive consistently.

The Surface is where a lot of *Hades II*'s design comes together. Instead of going from room to room, you're dropped into the remains of the city of Ethyria, fighting satyrs in storage rooms and courtyards. You're given multiple doors to open – and upgrades to claim – before you're kicked into the next area where every fight breaks out on the deck of a ship sailing through the Rift of Thessaly.

Not only is it a stunning visual leap from the underground arenas of the Underworld, it's also where *Hades II* stacks on the pressure by dumping pools of burning oil and aggressive undead pirates on you. It demands Soulslike levels of precision, and only works because of how tightly designed and flexible Melinoë's abilities are for controlling the battlefield.

PRESSURE'S ON

This half of the game justifies the spike in complexity of *Hades II* compared to *Hades I* for me. I have the Underworld for exploring how the various pieces fit together and the Surface for putting my favourite builds to the test. Some of the steps to get to a place where you can dabble in both are laborious, but the payoff is absolutely worth it – even if you just want to see more of the story and hear the guitar-wailing soundtrack morph into a full heavy metal orchestra.

Despite my issues with its pacing early on, *Hades II* won me over. It expands on the original game's imaginative take on Greek mythology, blending cerebral action RPG combat and slick narrative design into a complete package that feels distinct from the original. I'm glad I pushed through those early doubts, because it's as good a game as I've come to expect from Supergiant, a studio that hasn't missed yet. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Despite some stumbles in its opening hours, *Hades II* blooms with flexible combat and great characters.

88



Anakin was right,
I hate sand too.



RIGHT: Even *QWOP*
is open-world now.

FAR RIGHT: Sisyphus
has got nothing on me.

BELOW: Rage Against
the Machine dot mp3.



DARK SOLES

The ultimate challenge in **BABy STEPS** is just learning to walk

By Jody Macgregor

Baby Steps is a parody of open world games, and our collective punishment for using the phrase 'walking simulator'. You play Nate, a basement-dwelling loser mysteriously teleported from his couch to the wilderness like the Pevensie children being magicked to Narnia, only instead of plucky youngsters full of Blitz spirit you are a 35-year-old failure full of pizza.

There's a mountain in the wilderness and maybe if Nate climbs it he'll be able to go home. It's as reasonable an assumption as any, so off you set, taking your first (baby) steps, and immediately falling on your dumptruck arse.

Baby Steps recommends you play with a controller like a real yakuza, so I did. Squeezing one trigger lifts your foot, pushing a stick moves that foot. You've got a fine degree of control over where that foot ends up before you put it back down, which will not save you. Nate has all the balance and grace of a moose on ice, and he's doing this hike barefoot.

He could have got shoes at the start of the climb, but he turned them down. In the first of many delightfully improvised cutscenes, Nate meets a cheerful Australian hiker who offers help and immediately says no. Nate is so awkward he wants every social interaction to end the moment it begins, if not sooner, rejecting every offer of help – including a map I would really have appreciated.

Baby Steps takes the idea of games as challenges, of hard modes and iron man runs and proud declarations that yellow paint is ruining videogames, and personifies that as a specific kind of man: a man who will not ask for directions no matter how lost he is. The next time someone dresses their victory over a videogame as some macho triumph, I'll be thinking of Nate, his onesie turning brown as he flails in the mud.

A man who will not ask for directions no matter how lost he is

A HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

In addition to the challenge of working your way from one campfire to the next as you ascend a series of zones, there are optional challenges to hurl your wobbly cheeks at. Hats are precariously placed on top of trees or broken piles, and so are lost objects to return to nearby firetowers. But every time you tumble there's a high chance you'll lose your hat or whatever's in your hand, and the act of leaning over to pick it back up can send you tumbling again. I lost a hat when I fell through the roof of a

barn and couldn't find it in all the straw, a moment so dispiriting I gave up on hats entirely and did the rest of the climb bareheaded.

But the most dispiriting moments are when you're completely at a loss of which hardscrabble climbs are even doable. Sometimes there's only one way up (like the ant tunnel leading out of the sandcastle), but sometimes there are multiple paths of varying difficulty. How many times do you throw yourself at a broken rock face or cactus bridge or wet plank before you trundle off to see if there's an easier way?

More than once I gave up on something that turned out to actually be the easy option because I blundered my first couple of attempts, then wandered around for an hour trying things that were far harder. At one point I knocked down a yellow shovel I could have used as a bridge and spent an age trying other ascents before learning that if I quit out and went back in again the shovel returned to its original location.

Odds are you'll find at least one moment in *Baby Steps* you think crosses the line from 'funny satire of videogame design and difficulty discourse' into 'actual bullshit someone should be ashamed of'. It'll happen somewhere different for everyone, though the odds of it being one of the many bullshit moments in the sandy zone are high.

Normally satire makes it hard to take the thing it's satirising seriously, but after almost 15 hours of waddling my way up one mountain I loaded *Borderlands 4*, and doing a doublejump-glide into a jetbike felt incredible. *Baby Steps* is a great, but I think I will just chill in a game with quest markers for a while. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy only make it 3D

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPERS
Gabe Cuzzillo, Maxi Boch, Bennett Foddy

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 13900-HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
babystepsgame.com

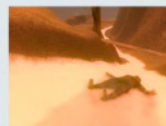
SEE THAT MOUNTAIN? *The worst places in Baby Steps*



SANDCASTLE
Children love sandpits. But children are idiots.



BOX HELL
Accurately named. A cardboard nightmare you'll never escape.



THE MILK SLIDE
Milk is for babies and they can keep it.



THE POISON SWAMP
Mud: like milk, but bad for your bones.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Baby Steps is one of the funniest games I've ever played, but it is also one of the most frustrating.

85

RETURN TO IVALICE

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS – THE IVALICE CHRONICLES is a tactical treat

By Kerry Brunskill

Somebody pinch me. They've done it. They've actually done it: not only can I finally play *Final Fantasy Tactics* on my PC, but this timeless classic has been done justice. It's not some old game hastily shoved in an emulation wrapper and sent out to die. It's not some brand-new thing so polished and changed it feels ashamed of its heritage, either. It's simply everything I had hoped for.

I dived into the classic mode first, keen to see how the decades-old strategy game I first fell in love with on a PlayStation had been recreated for modern hardware. Here polygonal edges are rough and raw, the pixels in every sprite are so large I can count them, and the pre-rendered movies are old enough to buy their own drinks. It's unvarnished in a respectful way, as if it were an ancient relic to be handled with care.

Satisfied there was a near-perfect recreation of *Tactics* to retreat to whenever I needed a dose of old, I then ploughed ahead with the completely separate remaster – and ended up even happier.

MADE IN HEAVEN

I know 'timeless classic' is an overused phrase, but I think it's the only one that accurately describes this game. It's a thrilling political and personal drama where every revelation quickly leads to another heartbreaking tragedy. It's a fantastic twist on *Final Fantasy*'s traditional job system, encouraging me to hand-craft a small team of battle-ready specialists. These halves come together beautifully, every fight part of a story, every story leading to a fight. It's no wonder so many indie PC RPGs still try to recapture the feel of everything from its tactical skirmishes to its gorgeous art.

So I approached its visual changes with some trepidation. I'm not normally a fan of smoothing out or sharpening up low-resolution textures, and *The Ivalice Chronicles* does both. However, instead of

merely smearing all the art, making corners so sharp I could cut myself on them and calling the end result HD, what's been achieved here shows a great deal of care and respect for the original work.

Lightly bevelled edges work in harmony with a subtle noise filter, creating just enough coarseness to tie the smooth 3D environments and flat 2D sprites together. An optional soft focus effect turns every

battlefield into a handcrafted diorama. It's all recognisable and true to the spirit of the original, while still looking crisp on modern displays.

What's been achieved here shows a great deal of care and respect

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
One of the finest strategy RPGs ever made, now on PC

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

STEAM DECK
Playable

LINK
steam.pm/
app/1004640

I expected the freshly recorded voice acting heard during cutscenes to be expressive, but I didn't expect the all-new in-battle lines for even generic units to bring as much personality to the game as they do. My White Mage was automatically assigned a surly voice, often responding with a curt "Wot?" when selected. This simple coincidence transformed what used to be 'some healer' into an enjoyably abrasive character, a fun contrast to all the sparkly divine magic she dished out.

Even my opponents have new banter. A reused floating human sprite with an undead tag really does feel more believably ghostly when they open their turn with a monstrous groan instead of a voiced line. The game's better for it.

UNDER PRESSURE

The battles themselves remain blissfully untouched: *Final Fantasy Tactics* is as unrelentingly deep as it's always been. Height and depth and even rocks jutting out of the ground need to be taken into consideration.

Because every detail matters, right down to the type of ground beneath my feet, it's easy to believe I really am out here in the baking desert, or fighting in a deep forest while it's raining. Swamp water isn't just a sickly colour, it's poisonous to touch, and if I'm not careful I might leap into a too-deep pool and have a tough time getting out.

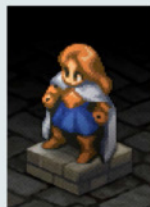
Wherever I am, there's always some dangerous snag to watch out for or some clever trick to exploit: a high vantage point that will give my archer an edge or a troublesome enemy I can stop with magic while I work on thinning out the rest of them. There's a lot to keep track of, down to which direction someone faces at the end of their turn.

The difference is how much effort the remaster puts into helping educate and inform players. For the first hour or so I can't sneeze without

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Picking the right person for the right job

KNIGHT



Great for when you want to hit someone so hard that their armour breaks into pieces.

BLACK MAGE



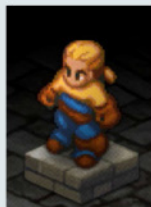
Need an entire group of enemies burned to a crisp instantly? These guys can do it.

NINJA

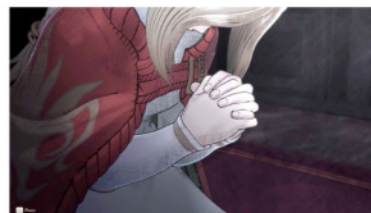


Two swords really are better than one. Fact.

MACHINIST



Brings a gun to a sword fight. Is that cheating?



ABOVE: Hey, how did this photo of the PC Gamer Towers' Halloween party get in here?

FAR LEFT: Be honest, you want to ride a Chocobo, too.

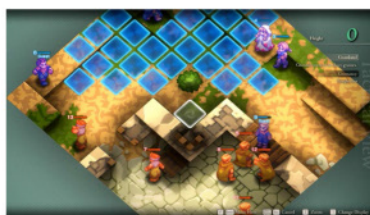
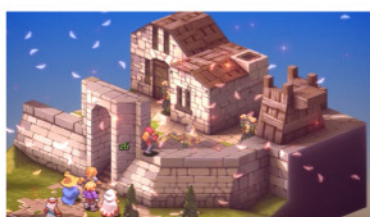
BELOW: The upgraded visuals absolutely retain the character of the original graphics.





ABOVE: This bit is still the stuff of nightmares and chewed controllers.

BELOW: Red chocobos are a good thing, right?



another concise tip turning up, covering everything from basic menu commands to the purpose of an outfitter's fitting room. Newcomers, or even those that have simply been away for a while, get context-sensitive help whenever something new comes up, and experts can dismiss these screens as quickly as they appear. Detailed tutorials on every subject under the sun are accessible whenever our hero, Ramza, is sitting on the world map, but thanks to these organic pop-ups they become optional extra help rather than homework.

KEEP YOURSELF ALIVE

Additional assistance is everywhere I look in battle, making it easier to make good, tactical decisions and fully enjoy the interlocking job/skill learning/equipment systems. At the start of each fight I'm now invited to place my formation directly onto the field rather than on an entirely separate (and not especially helpful) generic deployment screen.

The turn order bar running down the side of the screen allows me to see at a glance exactly when a crucial healing spell will kick in, or if an enemy has a chance of killing off my archer before their lengthy aimed attack is unleashed. A new overhead tactical view makes it so much easier to understand my surroundings and reposition my units without having to constantly spin the camera, and even integrates per-tile magical terrain information – essential knowledge for any would-be geomancer – into this point of view.

This knowledge was always in the

game somewhere, but its accessibility now means combat flows better than it ever did before. I find myself clearly remembering – and then actually using – small bits of information I was once only vaguely aware of and could never quite be bothered to look up.

If that's not enough to keep my party alive I can always fall back on a small set of frequently updated autosaves, or retry a battle from the start if things aren't going well. The latter even allows me to alter my formation and their equipment if it turns

out a particular setup is about as useful as a cocktail umbrella in a thunderstorm. And there's no fear of saving myself into an unwinnable position anymore, thanks to the option to warp back out to the world map any time I need to (minus any XP, progress, or items acquired).

However deep into a tough string of battles I am, I know I can always escape and come back better prepared later. Personal experimentation is warmly welcomed and encouraged, and always more satisfying than rummaging around someone else's guide for answers.

Or I could swap between a trio of all-new difficulty levels any time I'm not in the middle of a fight. The default (Knight) is generally balanced and fair, but if I've built a dual-wielding super team capable of crushing everything to dust I can give hard (Tactician) a whirl and enjoy an extra challenge. If I'm tired, stuck on one particular boss, or just so enthralled by the latest plot twist I can't wait to see what happens next I can knock it down to Squire and

enjoy a little leniency (just a little, mind you). Much like my beloved *XCOM 2*, the game's primary concern is that I'm having fun, not that I'm playing it 'correctly'.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

The story that ties these enjoyable battles together is as fascinating (and sadly, relevant) now as it's ever been. Every cutscene seems to introduce a dozen new twists as nobles with more money and power than sense fail to go five minutes without betraying each other and routinely kick the poor when they're already down for some short-term gain. Tavern rumours slowly, subtly peel away from reality. They're not lies, but they eventually become a conveniently selective and biased retelling of the truth.

This tangled web of betrayal, tragedy and intrigue – motives wrapped in half-truths, traps waiting to be sprung – used to be a little overwhelming, but now I don't need a photographic memory for who just stabbed who thanks to several helpful recap features. The excellent State of the Realm tab will show me exactly who was active (and alive) at any major point up to the present moment, and there are multiple detailed entries on everything from the fate of unseen royals to distant kingdoms. I can even rewatch cleared events as they are shown in the remake (which is essentially as they were in the PlayStation game, now with added voice acting) or, where available, watch crisp HD renditions of the PSP's movies instead.

Whether I want a general idea of what the heck's going on or hope to become a respected scholar of Ivalician history, this game will tell me everything I want to know.

It's this willingness to share its knowledge that makes this remaster so special. It wants to be played and understood by everyone, to be taken apart and put back together however suits the person playing it best. Whatever draws you to the game, whether that's character builds, or political turmoil, this release is the definitive way to experience it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The *Ivalice Chronicles* is an extraordinary remaster of an essential RPG, and as unmissable today as it ever was.

91

Detailed tutorials on every subject under the sun are accessible

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

All the world's a stage



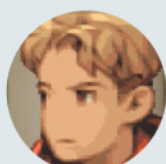
RAMZA

Good guy who history thinks is a bad guy.



DELITA

Good guy, apart from all the complicated bad guy bits.



WIEGRAF

Bad guy with very good reasons to be a bad guy.



THUNDER GOD CID

Battle-winning guy who is super strong.

The game features a large cast of well-sketchd characters, including a helpful dog.



PEARLY FRIGHTS

SNARL is a horror game with bite

Beyond Booleans has released some excellent adventure games over the last few years. I reviewed *Teeth of Glass* last year, and now a prequel has arrived in *Snarl*, which tells a new tale of cosmic horror featuring the monstrous 'grey man' and his mouth full of jagged glass teeth. He's not a guy you want to mess with, as he can tear you apart with a flick of his hand.

Snarl takes place in the 1970s, which was already horrific enough without a demon's involvement. The game begins with two detectives in a diner, who spring to life when a father and son stumble through the doors. The dad has been injured, and there's a creepy figure standing outside the diner. When one of the detectives goes to investigate, the figure explains that he wants the boy, before revealing his horrid glass teeth and demonstrating that he means business.

To cut a long story short (and a tall person into chunks), the inhabitants quickly become trapped in the diner, and it's up to you, the detective, to figure out why the grey man wants the boy, and how to free the trapped diners before you all expire.

There are some clever puzzles standing between you and the multiple endings, involving items found in the diner, but soon branching out into more exotic territory. After your first encounter with the grey man, you wake up

to discover you have all entered some hell dimension.

The puzzles adapt accordingly, now asking you to manhandle statuettes, and prod at glowing pustules, and assemble some leathery jigsaw

skin, so yes, *Snarl* will require some fortitude in the stomach region.

DENTAL PLAN

You'll want to push through the puzzles, because you'll want to see the story's end. It's a cracking setup with several standout moments along

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The latest adventure game in a loose series about a monstrous creature with glass teeth

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Beyond Booleans

PUBLISHER

Beyond Booleans

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bit.ly/Snarl

the way, and the game nails the ending. Or I should say endings, as the story branches depending on your actions. The seemingly impossible task of surviving the grey man is not as impossible as it seems, and the way you get there feels satisfying and believable.

Snarl is a marked improvement on *Teeth of Glass*, in terms of its puzzles, story, and the scope of the game, which widens the world of the grey man and neatly sets up a future instalment – while still having a conclusive ending. The most impressive part is the pixel art, however. In fact, it's the overall art direction, which juxtaposes iconic scenes of Americana with nightmarish tableaux of cosmic horror. If you like horror and you like clicking on stuff – and you love combining stuff with other stuff – Beyond Booleans is a developer you should be keeping two eyes on. ■

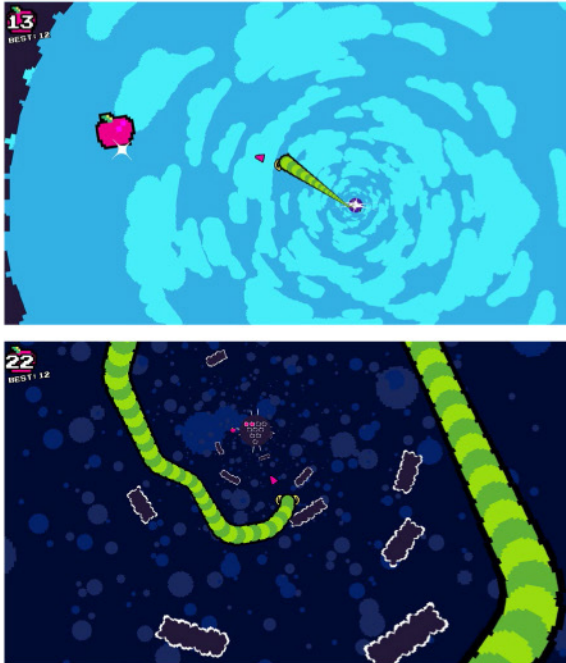
PC GAMER

VERDICT

An adventure game that tells a creepy branching story and that doesn't skimp on the puzzles in the process.

83

BELOW: The sense of depth is immense.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
dietzribi

LINK
bit.ly/DeepSnake

SOLID SNAKE

The phone classic gets a new dimension in **DEEP SNAKE**

If the snake from *Snake* fell into the event horizon of a black hole, it would be something like *Deep Snake*. You're still grabbing fruit and growing into a bigger snake with a pesky tail, but now you're doing that while exploring a dizzying hole.

It begins simply enough, with just a bit of depth to the game space. You steer the snake by pressing Left or Right, and as you do so, it tunnels deeper, towards the centre. Sometimes the fruit is at the rim of the void, sometimes it spawns right at the bottom of it. And every time you chomp ten apples, the bottom falls off and the hole gets bigger.

Two words to describe the effect would be 'bloody hell'. It really feels like 3D wizardry, with the bottom of the void resembling a gnat's bathroom from afar and then

expanding to the size of a palace when you tunnel towards it. But the best part is shooting back to the top and watching the world shrink beneath your tail.

Deep Snake is simultaneously easier and harder than regular, prehistoric snake. It's easier because, even with a very big tail, you now have an enormous space to play around in, meaning it's less common to stumble into yourself and die. However, there's a slightly awkward visual transition while the stuff at the bottom of the void expands, and it's very difficult to avoid these obstacles in those couple of seconds.

It's never fun dying when it's not completely your fault. However, you learn to adapt. That little annoyance is not a huge deal compared to the incredible visual effect at the heart of *Deep Snake*. ■

77

UP TO SCRATCH

SCRATCH AND REVEAL challenges perceptions of gender

In an age of increasingly fake photographs and videos, if only you could grab a coin and scratch away to find the truth of the matter. Well – you guessed it – that's the gist of the joyful *Scratch and Reveal*, which has you defacing photographs to uncover their authentic incarnations.

The original photographs were taken at the turn of the 20th century by Bolette Berg and Marie Høeg, and show the Norwegian women dressing up as soldiers, explorers, and other distinctly unladylike professions. One of their brothers gets in on the fun too, by dressing up as a woman in some wonderful photos.

Scratch and Reveal adds another layer to the photographs – literally. In this browser game, developer Susana G Chueca has doctored the images so they are more socially

acceptable, so they better reflect what we would expect from women of the Victorian/Edwardian era, and pasted them on top of the originals. This picture of Marie standing by her brother Karl, so convincingly doctored by Chueca, is in fact disguising a scandalous photograph displaying the siblings in the act of cross-dressing – Marie wearing traditionally male clothes, and Karl sporting a lovely bonnet – when you take your coin and physically scratch away at their faces.

It's a lot of fun, defacing each image to see what's been altered or swapped around. The photos were already great, but this additional layer has allowed for some sweet reveals to accompany the images. And what better way to uncover the truth than by grabbing the nearest coin and scratching away. ■

BELOW: The game incorporates real photos.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Susana G Chueca

LINK
bit.ly/ScratchAndReveal

80



If you risk doing this in a school cafeteria then you deserve the wedgies.

SCHOOL DAZE

Revisiting the school of hard knocks in **BULLY**

The menu music for *Bully*, composed by Shawn Lee, is an obvious homage to the work of Goblin, the progressive rock band most famous for their work with Italian director Dario Argento. At first I thought this an odd choice. But, on reflection, referencing a horror about a new student joining a monstrously evil place of learning could not be more apt.

At the risk of sounding traumatised by the British education system, nothing provides a more stark reminder of feral barbarity of school quite like this. Initially, it seems quite benign: a world of nuggies, wedgies and cartoonishly fondled buttocks. But, before long, you're chucking bricks at strangers and forcing weaklings to soil themselves. It's essentially Oz with varsity jackets.

It plays like *GTA*, filtered through the simplified lens of state education: defeat gangs, avoid authority, recover a portly girl's missing chocolate, etc etc. Lessons are distilled into simplistic minigames – things like QTEs, dissecting frogs, and painting portraits of your confusingly attractive art teacher. These lessons unlock extra skills and

rewards, and I can't help but feel personally attacked by the fact that passing English allows you to apologise more effectively.

CLIQUE AND COLLECT

At times *Bully* straddles a troubling

line between wholesome and horrifying, like an Ari Aster Dennis the Menace adaptation. *Bully* is how your dad incorrectly remembers things before health and safety ruined everything – a world

where it's perfectly fine to blind other children with chemicals or castrate them with a slingshot, just because they dress differently. It all makes for something ghoulishly compelling. One of those games that's somehow far more than the sum of its parts. It's also strange and

GTA filtered through the simplified lens of state education

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Grand Theft Auto's delinquent, doomed, soon-to-be-incarcerated New England nephew

EXPECT TO PAY
£10

DEVELOPER
Rockstar New England

PUBLISHER
Rockstar Gamer

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/12200/Bully_Scholarship_Edition

unique: the kind of title only Rockstar can make.

All this means that *Bully* truly lives up to the pretend Latin name they invented to make the game more palatable to a UK audience: *Canis Canem Edit*, or 'dog eat dog'. Looking back, the name switch seems like an adorably toothless, knee-jerk reaction to the media furore of the time. But it's actually a darker, more appropriate title: this is less of an open-world game, more of a nature documentary. And while it's aspirational seeing Jimmy ascend through the ranks and win the favour of the various cliques, you can't help but feel the tang of existential dread for all the Algernons, Melvins and Eunices stuck on the bottom of the educational food chain. Perhaps it's not worth worrying about. Let the early bloomers bloom; eventually, the geeks shall inherit the Earth. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Often silly and scarily astute, *Bully* is the perfect way to remind yourself that being a grown up is a mercy.

82

BELOW: I desperately want to give him the Bad Drugs.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£13.50

DEVELOPER
Bad Viking

PUBLISHER
Iceberg Interactive

NURSERY CRIMES

Going potty for **STRANGE HORTICULTURE**

As I write this, flanked by three real house plants and one Lego one, camouflaged like a Navy SEAL in a budget '80s action movie, I wonder if my obsession with foliage has gone too far. But, after 20 minutes with *Strange Horticulture*, I realise I'm nothing but a novice.

I am an ungerminated pod in a world of fronds, worts, woad and nodes. And the worst thing is that I've been left in charge of a shop. A shop full of plants. I can just about tell a dieffenbachia from a calathea in real life, but *Strange Horticulture* requires a huge level of knowledge.

And while that should be stressful, it actually isn't. Time works differently here. My patient customers will wait silently as I leaf (please excuse me) through my encyclopaedia, meticulously

cross-referencing flower shapes and vague scents. And as if that wasn't satisfying enough, it's accompanied by the therapeutic pitter-patter of rain on thin windows. You can practically inhale the sweet, loamy smell of a real-life florist. Making random guesses is prohibited by the Rising Dread meter that increases every time you make a mistake or visit a frightening location, which is the most relatable gameplay mechanic ever invented. My dread has been rising for around 40 years, and I'm yet to cultivate a houseplant that can help. But despite this, it's impossible to feel stressed playing *Strange Horticulture*. I might be slinging poisons to strangers or visiting witches deep in woods, but I still feel more relaxed here than I ever did trying to remember the code for a conference pear. ■

88

WICKED LITTLE

Notes in **NANCY DREW: WARNINGS AT WAVERLY ACADEMY**

I picked this because I had it on good authority that this is the most autumnal *Nancy Drew* game, but it does accidentally mean that we have two titles this month set in leafy northeastern American schools. But, functionally speaking, I'm not sure it's conceivable for them to be more different.

For a start, the main threat here is receiving a rude letter, rather than having your head flushed down the bog by a jock with a hormone disorder. Not visually: this is a point-and-click game from 2009 made by a team that's churned out 34 *Nancy Drew* games in 26 years. The NPCs look like digested Lego Friends and everything has a Vaseline-smear nebulousity that makes it feel like you're playing a wet VHS of American telly from the '90s. I actually rather like it. It's an

interactive window to the past. These games barely changed because people neither wanted it nor needed it.

It's weirder still that there's still a hunger for them, but I think I understand it. It's the same reason there are Reddit threads dedicated to shaving with a straight razor and badger brush: there's something reassuring about total disregard for modern quality of life upgrades. That's not to say *Warnings at Waverly Academy* isn't strangely pitched and occasionally infuriating: *Nancy* sounds like she smokes 50 Woodbines a day and washes them down with painkillers and whisky. And the puzzles are quite often unhelping. One astonishingly vague DNA conundrum can be solved two ways, but only one actually works in-game. Despite all this, though, I'm glad the game exists for the fans out there. ■

64

BELOW: 'Casebook design with clear visual hierarchy is my passion'



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.80

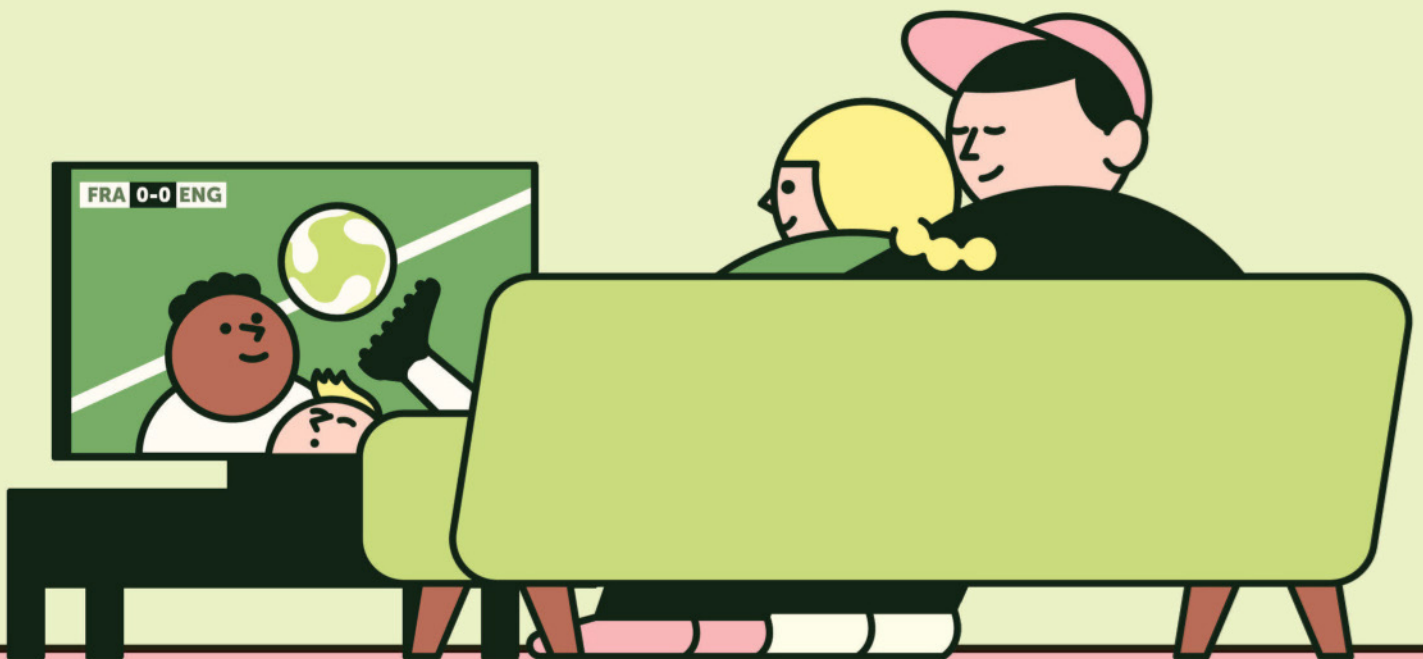
DEVELOPER
HeR Interactive

PUBLISHER
HeR Interactive

Advertisement

GO.
COMPARE

SAVVY SPENDING STARTS AT HOME



From leaky taps to locked doors,
scan here for home cover options.



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

92

GROUP TEST

Six modern mics tested for voice clarity, noise reduction, and depth.

98

TECH REPORT

The lasting legacy of the lockdown PC gaming hardware boom.

100

TECH TALES

How PC gamers are becoming obsessed with artisanal hardware.

102

TECH BUILD

A supercool rig sporting a gorgeous case and a powerful RTX 5080 FE.



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Craft the best gaming rig for your budget with our ideal components list.



GROUP TEST

MICROPHONES

A whole host of new gaming microphones are here, so it's time to sort the sonic superstars from the aural nightmares. *By Andy Edser*



Should you wish to free yourself from a tinny headset mic, a good standalone microphone should be high on your shopping list. And I've got good news for you – gone are the days when a good recording setup meant XLR cables and complicated interfaces, as a simple USB

connection is now all you need for excellent vocal capture at home.

So for those looking to raise your audio game, it's never been easier to capture excellent sound from the comfort of your home. But with so many microphone options on the market, which do you pick?





Capsule Elite

NZXT **£85**

Rich and fruity

1 This NZXT mic is sure to split opinions on first viewing. Some will find its design charming, while others (myself included) will think it looks a little too retro-chic. Still, what really matters here is the sound, and that's where the Capsule Elite excels.

The noise-rejection, for example, is superb. That's a quality inherent to the microphone itself, before you even get to the noise suppression options in the software. The large, 25mm capsule is also a bit of a stunner when it comes to audio quality, capturing rich, weighty tones

befitting a much more expensive mic. It also comes with customisable rear lighting, some handy LED indicators on the front, and a stand that's more than capable of keeping upright under duress. It does strike a funny angle by default, though, and is more than a little fiddly to set up. Still, these are minor complaints, and if you can get over some of the design quirks, the Capsule Elite makes for an excellent mid-range choice.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tonally superb
- Rejects noise like a champ
- Room-splitting design

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C / **SAMPLE RATE:** UP TO 192KHZ, 24-BIT / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-20,000 HZ

SoloCast 2

HYPERX **£50**

Clever customer

2 It might sound silly to say, but there's not a whole lot of innovation in budget microphone design these days. The HyperX SoloCast 2 has a party trick, though, and it comes in the form of a breech-like mechanism which opens to reveal a hidden stand integrated into its cylindrical frame.

Clever, that. It's also fully boom arm-mountable, with an adaptor hidden underneath, and comes with an integrated pop filter buried deep within its handsome metal grille for close-up vocal work. Which is where the SoloCast 2 likes it

best. It's a great-sounding microphone when placed near to your lips, but a touch quiet at a distance, meaning you'll need to ramp up the gain in the HyperX Ngenuity software to make your vocals stand out. That'd be all well and good, but the included noise cancelling is a little light, making this mic prone to picking up unwanted noise. Still, it's a solid performer nonetheless, and very well-priced for what you receive.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Smart design
- Solid budget performer
- Quiet at a distance

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C / **SAMPLE RATE:** UP TO 96KHZ 24-BIT / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000 HZ



GROUP TEST

IF A PODCAST-READY SOUND IS WHAT YOU DESIRE, THE MV7+ IS THE MICROPHONE FOR YOU

USB Condenser Microphone

AMAZON BASICS £25

Budget banger

3 Yep, I wouldn't blame you if you did a double-take at the price. The Amazon Basics mic is astonishingly cheap, so it's even more of a surprise when you open the plain brown box and discover a remarkably weighty, professional-feeling microphone.

There are more delights in store when you listen to the playback, too. While the Basics won't be winning any awards for its sound quality, it gets on with the job of capturing your vocals at a distance with aplomb. You don't get any extras, mind. Just a (rather short) cable and a slightly bizarre tilting stand,

which ups the cute factor to near-unbearable levels for this tiny little mic.

You also get a mute button on the front, and... no, that's it for controls. And there's no fancy software to play with, either. The good news, however, is that the Amazon Basics unit is well-tuned out of the box, which makes it as straightforward to configure as it gets. Plug it in, get to recording, and count your saved pennies. Excellent.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Astonishingly cheap
- Great capture
- Light on features

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C TO TYPE-A / **SAMPLE RATE:** 48KHZ 16-BIT / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-20,000 HZ

MV7+ Podcast Microphone

SHURE £269

Premium perfection

4 The Shure MV7+ is not for everyone. That's because it requires a (not included) boom arm to hold itself aloft, and works best from a close up position. It's a dynamic mic, which means it's not suited to recording from a distance, preferring instead to hug your face and pick up every single vocal detail.

And my goodness, it does it well. If a podcast-ready sound is what you desire, the MV7+ is the microphone for you. Like the MV6, it comes with software that's so good at its job, you simply need to tick all the options and leave it alone. It's

been designed to make vocal capture easy, and immediately gets to work recording the warm, crispy details of your voice with the minimum of effort straight out of the box.

Speak within 12 inches of its substantial pop filter, and the MV7+ will reward you with a genuinely studio-like sound, which makes audio tweekers like me look shockingly redundant. It's expensive, I'll grant you – but worth every penny, if you ask me.

PC GAMER VERDICT

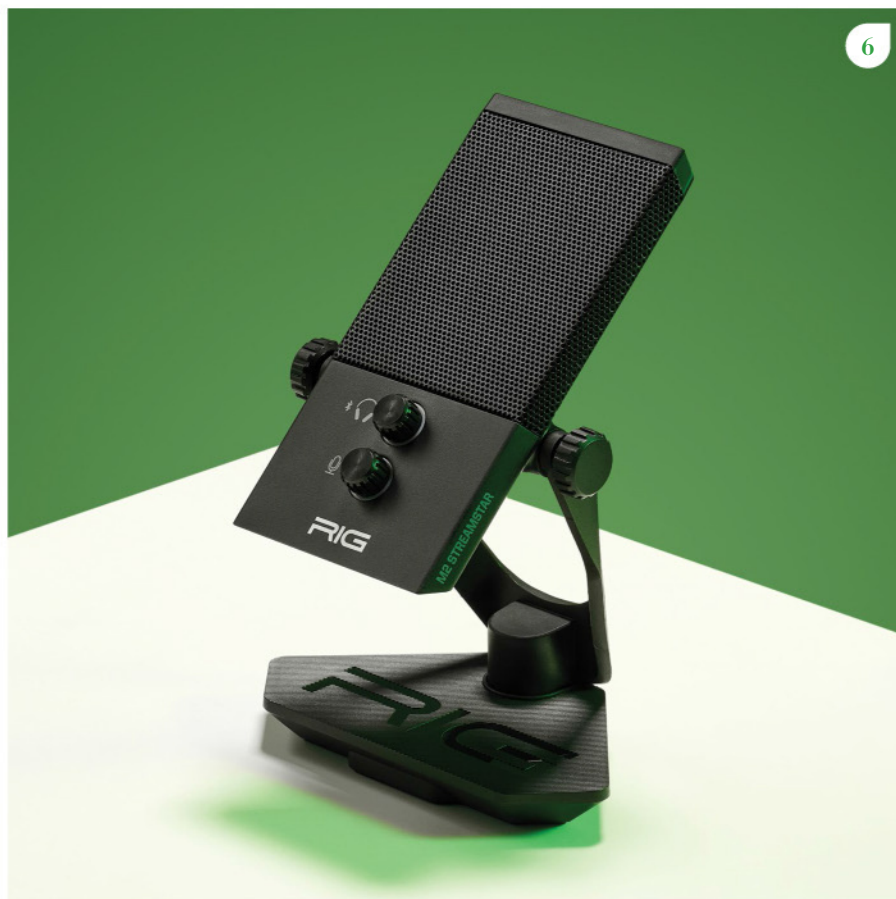
- Professional sound
- Easy to configure
- No included stand

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: UNIDIRECTIONAL (CARDIOID) / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C/XLR / **SAMPLE RATE:** UP TO 48KHZ, 24-BIT / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-50,000 HZ



GROUP TEST

**THE SHURE
MIC GIVES OFF AN
AIR OF CONFIDENCE**



MICROPHONE POLAR PATTERNS EXPLAINED

Cardioid

This polar pattern captures a defined area of sound around the front of the mic, making it resistant to background noises and resulting in a dry, usable vocal signal.

Supercardioid

Supercardioid microphones capture a 'bubble' of sound at the front of the mic, while also picking up a small amount from the rear for added depth and ambience.

Bi-directional

A bi-directional pattern captures audio from both the front and the rear of the microphone, making it ideal for recording two speakers sitting either side of the capsule at once.

Omnidirectional

These microphones have the same sensitivity from all directions, making them great for capturing a whole room or multiple speakers at the same time.

MV6

SHURE £139

Big but brilliant

5 The Shure MV6 is large. Very large. This desktop-dominator might look like something you'd find on stage at your local venue, but that's because it comes from one of the most respected brands in the recording industry – and it shows off those credentials the second you plug it in.

The software is simple to use, reducing complicated settings like EQ and gain control down to single sliders. Far from being overly basic, though, the Shure mic instead gives off an air of confidence. It knows what it's doing, even if you don't.

Essentially, the MV6 is a set and forget desktop microphone with an impeccable pedigree, and those qualities come to the fore when you start recording. While it's not perfect (the noise cancelling can be overly aggressive if left to its own devices), this mic is brilliant at capturing your vocals cleanly, yet with plenty of studio-like warmth. It also feels like it'll survive the next apocalypse, never mind the next few years. Simply brilliant.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Superb desktop audio
- Simple software
- Very large

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: UNIDIRECTIONAL (CARDIOID) / CONNECTIVITY: USB TYPE-C /
SAMPLE RATE: UP TO 48KHZ 24-BIT / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20-20,000 HZ

RIG M2 Streamstar

NACON £130

Fussy customer

6 While I'm a big proponent of the idea that USB microphones these days are simple to configure, there is the odd exception – and the Streamstar is exactly that. It's a fiddly, fussy microphone to configure in a desktop position, and not exactly cheap when compared to its closest competition.

It's not all bad, though. Stick the Streamstar on the end of a boom arm, bring it close to your laughing gear (I'm duty-bound to explain this is British for 'mouth') and it's capable of capturing a decent tone, suitable for streaming or even a podcast.

On a desk, though, the Streamstar proves to be quiet at a distance, meaning you'll need to crank the gain with the (somewhat flimsy) knob on the front. And without any noise cancelling software, it's prone to capturing every tap, click, and breath noise you can think of. Given the price, it's a shame that the Streamstar doesn't meet expectations – and it's simply outclassed by the rest of the competition here.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good for close-up work
- Noise prone
- Flimsy design

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / CONNECTIVITY: USB TYPE-C, 3.5MM AUX, BLUETOOTH /
SAMPLE RATE: UP TO 192KHZ, 24-BIT / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20-20,000 HZ

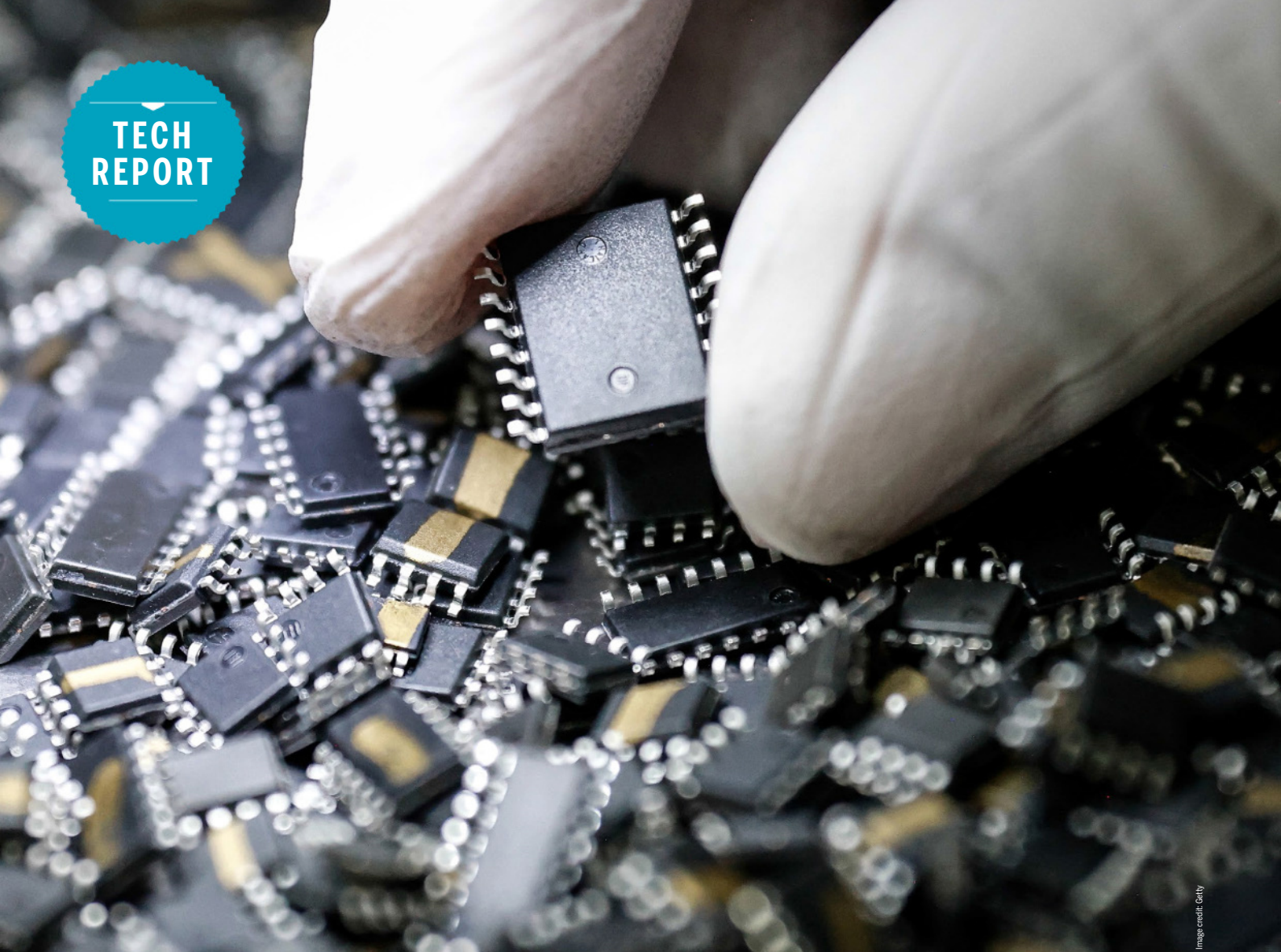


Image credit: Getty

THE CHIPS ARE DOWN

The lasting legacy of the lockdown PC hardware boom

It all feels like an odd dream now. Stepping out onto our doorsteps to bang on our pans every Tuesday evening. Nationwide shortages of baking ingredients. Terrible, self-administered haircuts and vast lines outside supermarkets, shoppers spaced two metres apart and wearing face coverings that you'd previously only seen in news reports about SARS in Asia.

However surreal the events of 2020 might seem now, five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic's effects were very real. As nations imposed their own lockdown rules of varying stringency, supply chains broke down and waiting lists lengthened exponentially. Zoom in on the PC hardware market, and PCB shortage completely disrupted the market. Lockdown restrictions in China, Taiwan and Korea, where the vast majority of circuit boards are manufactured, left the entire sector without its most crucial component. Worse, there was stiff competition for PCBs from every other sector. Car production stalled. Medical equipment was being made at a slower rate, at a time when we needed it the most.

The very limited numbers of PCB-equipped hardware units that were being made were further disrupted by an unprecedented logistical breakdown, brought about by border closures and export regulations. And not that this cake needed any icing on it, but the surge in demand for all

kinds of electronic goods, stimulated by a housebound general population looking to soothe its boredom, provided a final ingredient to the supply chain mess.

FALLOUT 2020

Five years on, the global community has jettisoned the 'new normal' and gone back to the old one. Face masks, while more frequent than they were pre-2020, are a rare sight and mercifully we've all stopped trying to give ourselves a comedy mullet with a set of dog clippers and a hand mirror, and relinquished control back to the professionals. But the PCB shortage isn't over, nor are the effects of supply chain disruption or a surge in demand in the PC hardware market.

Let's start with pricing. Everything from case fans to GPUs is fantastically, punitively expensive now, orders of magnitude steeper than pre-COVID prices. The reasons are numerous, but basic supply and demand plays its role here. In 2022 US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo stated she expected that PCB supply chain disruption would continue "possibly into early 2024, before we see any real relief". More recently PCB manufacturer Garner Osborne has stated that like its contemporaries, it's still playing catch-up in the wake of that supply chain breakdown five years ago and the perfect storm of increased demand that accompanied it. If you as much as poked your head into a GCSE business studies classroom, you'll know what



Green-eyed monster

Uncertainty around financial markets sent Bitcoin prices soaring during COVID, which in turn renewed interest and demand for cryptomining. With miners buying up huge swathes of Nvidia's limited GPU stock, the used card market became predatory and units were changing hands for four or five times their MSRP. Arguably that normalised a higher price point for enthusiast GPUs, so that by the time Nvidia came to launch its RTX 3x, 4x and 5x series cards, it could sell them at a higher price than ever before.



FAR LEFT: Nobody who did this during lockdown was even remotely pleased with the results.

LEFT: Takes you right back to that very long, very indoors summer, doesn't it?

THE NEW NORMAL *Four PC gaming staples you didn't see before lockdown*



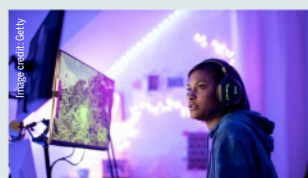
DIRECT DRIVE WHEELS

Now available in affordable sub-£500 bundles, a notion that was pure fantasy in 2020.



ARTISANAL PERIPHERALS

Buying these is less about what they can do, and more about how limited and exclusive they are.



STREAMER-GRADE SETUPS

RGB lightstrips and vibrant neon signs aren't just for making let's play videos any more.



STANDING DESKS

We all read the articles. We all bought them. And now we're all stuck with them.

increased demand and scarcity of supply does to pricing. COVID can't be blamed entirely for this, but it remains a contributing factor even now.

As for the surge in demand for PC hardware, market analysts including Market Watch were announcing the end of that phenomenon as early as Q1 2022, but they may have been a little early. Taking a longer view, the culture around PC gaming has changed since the lockdowns hit and a lot of those changes can't go back in the bottle.

Sim racing hardware manufacturers have finally – finally – caught up to the demand created by those 2020 lockdowns. All gamers wanted back then was an affordable direct drive wheel and pedals bundle to race online with in the kind of sims that they were watching real F1 driver compete in. But in 2020, Fanatec was pre-Corsair buyout and stocks were depleted very soon into the first wave of lockdowns. Logitech G fared better for availability, but didn't at the time have a direct drive wheelbase to offer. In fact not many manufacturers did. Moza, an upstart company from China, muscled in and became a permanent fixture on the sim racing scene by offering cheap direct drive hardware.

It's taken a full five years to see direct drive hit the mainstream though, with Logitech G, Thrustmaster and now even Turtle Beach and Nacon, entering the market with competitively priced bundles. The standard of wheels is immeasurably higher than it was five years ago, and it's hard to imagine that would have happened if people weren't so hungry for it in 2020 having watched Lando, Max, Charles et al streaming in their downtime.

COVID CAN'T BE BLAMED ENTIRELY, BUT REMAINS A FACTOR

Deeper than that though, it feels like we've evolved to value our gaming spaces in a different way. They've become true sanctuaries, adorned increasingly often in RGB lightstrips and finished with a gaming chair. Our hardware and peripherals aren't picked based purely on specs, but rather as an expression of our passion for the pastime. We pick artisanal gear over esports-grade models now, products with a story and, above all else, aesthetic appeal.

Reading that probably feels like reading 'water hydrates you' or 'weeks typically have seven days in them', so deeply has that thinking been absorbed. But even five years ago, many of us were simply making do, improvising PC gaming nooks wherever we could find space for an Ikea desk and access to a plug socket. COVID helped streamer culture break through into the mainstream, and streamer culture helped manufacturers to normalise a more curated gaming space.

What about actual PC sales? Perhaps that's the purest benchmark for how COVID changed the market. Was mass interest in PC gaming a flash in the pan, or have those recent lockdown converts stuck around? Well, it's muddy. 2020 and 2021's unit shipment sales are unlikely to be repeated, and they were followed by a huge dip in 2022, hitting a 20-year low. 2023 saw modest recovery, and after that point the buzz for AI combined with Windows 10's end of life has generated consistently higher sales year on year. One dreads to think what kind of global event might spark a surge in demand equivalent to 2020's, but if not numerically then culturally, lockdown left a mark on our corner of gaming. ■

Phil Iwanik

MONEY NO OBJECT

We're becoming obsessed with artisanal gear. Let's talk about it

If there's one phrase that's guaranteed to make you come across like a third-year humanities student who's got life figured out and now simply watches civilisation from the sidelines with a wry smile, it's this: 'late stage capitalism'. It's a term that implies society's imminent downfall at the hands of corporate greed. Whatever indicator of late stage capitalism the observer has noticed is also an indicator that these are the end times, before our economic and philosophical status quo is demolished and replaced by... well, whatever comes next. Nobody's sure about that minor detail.

Generally speaking, then, it's quite a blunt rhetorical device. Nobody can see the future, so there's some considerable confidence inherent in calling anything related to the present day 'late stage'.

Still, when you see an \$8,000/£6,000 mechanical keyboard amassing a six-month waiting list, you can kind of see their point.

Norbauer's Seneca doesn't offer wireless connectivity, or RGB backlighting. There's no adjustable key actuation point, or rapid trigger, or any of the other features that mass-market mechanical gaming keyboards use to catch your eye. However, it looks astounding. It looks like something you'd use to program a nice hot bath on the USSCS Nostromo. It could have come straight out of the recording studio where they tracked all your favourite songs from the '80s. The ones with the warmest, squishiest synths and the breathiest vocals.

And it can be purchased in its simplest form for \$3,060 (£2,280), or with all the extras for \$8,090. If that weren't preposterous enough, demand for this implausibly artisanal keyboard is so high that the waiting period is currently between six and nine months. If you were looking around for evidence that PC gaming has taken a cultural shift away from 'performance enhancing hardware' and into 'limited edition sneaker drops, but with PCBs', this is your definitive proof.

FOR KIT'S SAKE

But there's a supporting argument nearly everywhere else you look. Artisan mouse mats – quite literally, mouse mats made by a manufacturer called Artisan. Handcrafted, luxury wooden PC cases from Australian outfit Woodfort, yours for just shy of £1,500. Limited edition runs of Finalmouse models that sell for five times their MSRP. None of these items are even pretending to offer you better gaming performance, or increased functionality, for your cash. They simply exist to be sought after, and sought after they are.

From a gamer's perspective, it's understandable if the reaction this trend for expensive objets d'art is that of indifference. There's always a top end to any consumer market, one that's irrelevant to the majority but supported by enough financial whales to sustain a few very specialised companies.

IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING YOU'D USE ON THE USSCS NOSTROMO

THE NEW BETTER

But from a brand strategist's perspective, this consumer insight is far more meaningful. Imagine it: you're in the marketing team for a major PC hardware or peripherals brand, and you're observing that people are willing to pay huge sums of money for items that don't make them play better, but exist simply as status symbols, or expressions of their passion. What would you do?

That's right. You'd do what Corsair did, when it brought the Makr 75 barebones DIY keyboard to market. The selling point of a product like that isn't performance, which is otherwise the central pillar of Corsair's peripheral range. Instead it's about dialling a look, feel and set of features according to your own aesthetic tastes and needs. And that's a very sticky idea for marketers. Or what Razer did with the latest Blackshark Pro V3, a headset packed with far more features than anyone needs and which arrived to a warm reception from critics and consumers alike.

Perhaps it also represents a maturation of the platform. The earliest PC gaming equipment existed to discern itself



PHIL IWANIK
Long-time contributor Phil has frequently tried to interest us in his 'artisanal' line of PC-inspired fragrances. His 'Deliveroo-infused MMO keyboard' cologne has some particularly interesting notes.

DO YOU DO FINANCE? *Four preposterously priced artisanal peripherals*



NORBAUER SENECA

Prices range from 'cheap second hand car' (\$3,000) to 'expensive second hand car' (\$8,000) for this, er, keyboard.



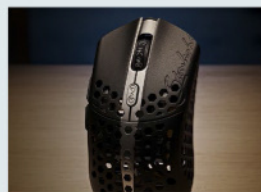
WOODFORT GENESIS

A £1,600 handcrafted wooden PC case for extra... cooling? No. Ventilation? Nope. Cool points? That's the bingo.



ARTISAN FX NINJA ZERO

Compared to its contemporaries, £62 for a mouse mat seems like a bargain. Until you look at how much other mouse mats cost.



FINALMOUSE STARLIGHT

Releasing their mice in limited drops like rare sneakers is a clever marketing move. Use it to click on stuff.



from the default: an assembly of beige office furniture optimised for filling in spreadsheets about quarterly sales, not for circle-strafing, or fragging n00bs. It's why gaming mice, keyboards, cases and the like all went black during the '00s. It was a striking difference compared to the computer your dad sat at all day in his boring old office.

In the interim, the market's become so saturated that peripherals within a manufacturer's lineup might sit apart in £20, or even £10, increments. We've all digested the 'better gear = better performance' messaging for so long that, well, maybe it just stopped landing with us.

Whereas a £1,500+ handcrafted PC case made of wood? That's a new story. A fresh expression of our passion for hardware, and deep knowledge of it. The trouble is, mainstream hardware prices have already been driven up so high by various depressing market factors that in order to stand out as a truly artisanal, luxury product, companies like Norbauer end up slapping an \$8,000 price tag on an unlit wired mechanical keyboard. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



ABOVE: Seneca's keyboards are objets d'arte. Translation: really expensive.

LEFT: This wood riser costs an additional \$290. This is not a misprint.



Over the decades, the important thing isn't what a piece of tech does – it's simply having it.

THE BUILD

Keep it chilly

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £2,091

1

CASE



Xtender

Arctic **£150**

The Xtender is Arctic's first foray into PC cases, and the design is excellent. It's a fishtank case, meaning the glass wraps around from the side to the front of the case, and requiring the fans to be mounted to the side of the motherboard. That's not ideal for

airflow – a surprising move from a cooling company – but it's not too detrimental to temps. Partially that's thanks to the three 140mm fans and two 120mm fans that come pre-installed in this thing. They're plenty capable and help keep added costs down.

Only once I'd finished building a PC into the Xtender did I truly appreciate its dashing good looks. The heavily tinted glass hides the mess of cables within and highlights the RGB lighting on the components and included PSU shroud cover. It looks great.



2

MOTHERBOARD



B850 LiveMixer WiFi

ASRock **£200**

With a good selection of USB ports, this motherboard offers good value for our choice of chip.

3

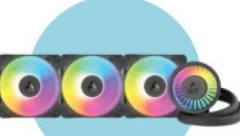
GRAPHICS CARD



GeForce RTX 5080 Founders Edition

Nvidia **£949**

I'm blown away by the quality of this Nvidia-designed card. It's sleek.

8 COOLER  Liquid Freezer III Pro 360 Arctic £80 The Liquid Freezer III Pro is an upgrade on the non-pro model for the same price.	7 POWER SUPPLY  850W Pure Power 12 Be Quiet! £110 With a native 12VHPWR connection, the Pure Power 12 has everything I need to hook up the RTX 5080 in this build.	6 SSD  P44 Pro Solidigm £187 A dependable NVMe SSD I've used for a while now, it runs at near the maximum speed for a PCIe 4.0 drive.	5 PROCESSOR  Ryzen 7 9700X AMD £285 With games often preferring eight cores, the Ryzen 7 9700X is one of the best ways to secure them on a budget.	4 MEMORY  Vengeance 32 GB DDR5-6000 Corsair £130 A quality set of RAM sticks that'll play nicely with my pick of processor, the Ryzen 7.
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YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,082

MOTHERBOARD		B760M Steel Legend WiFi ASRock £150 This board is affordable, DDR5 ready, and packed with features, including Wi-Fi support straight out of the box.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £120 Intel's budget 10-core chip from the Raptor Lake generation is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 9060 XT 8 GB AMD £260 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until even more budget GPU competition arrives.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		Fury Beast 16 GB (2x 8 GB) Kingston £65 We've made the switch to DDR5 here, as DDR4 is a bit old fashioned in 2025 and cheap kits are plentiful
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 750W Be Quiet! £95 This 750W power supply gives you a decent dose of headroom for some future upgrades, from a trusted manufacturer.
SSD		SN7100 1 TB Western Digital £60 Superb 4K read performance for a reasonable price makes this a great drive for any gaming PC, never mind a budget one.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Gaming 27G4XE AOC £150 AOC make some surprisingly cheap and well-specced little gaming monitors, like this 180 Hz 1080p display for less
KEYBOARD		Gamakay x NaughShark NS68 Gamakay £70 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,580

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £144 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £240 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 5060 Ti Nvidia £400 Nvidia's RTX 50-series cards have been hard to find for good prices, but the 16 GB model is widely available, punchy, and affordable.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 2TB Lexar £113 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation, large capacity and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		H27T22C-3 KTC £200 It's got a totally unpronounceable name, but this 200 Hz panel is plenty punchy at 1440p without breaking the bank.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £45 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 X Hyperspeed Razer £60 The regular V2 is great if you can find one, but this version delivers impeccable gaming performance for less.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

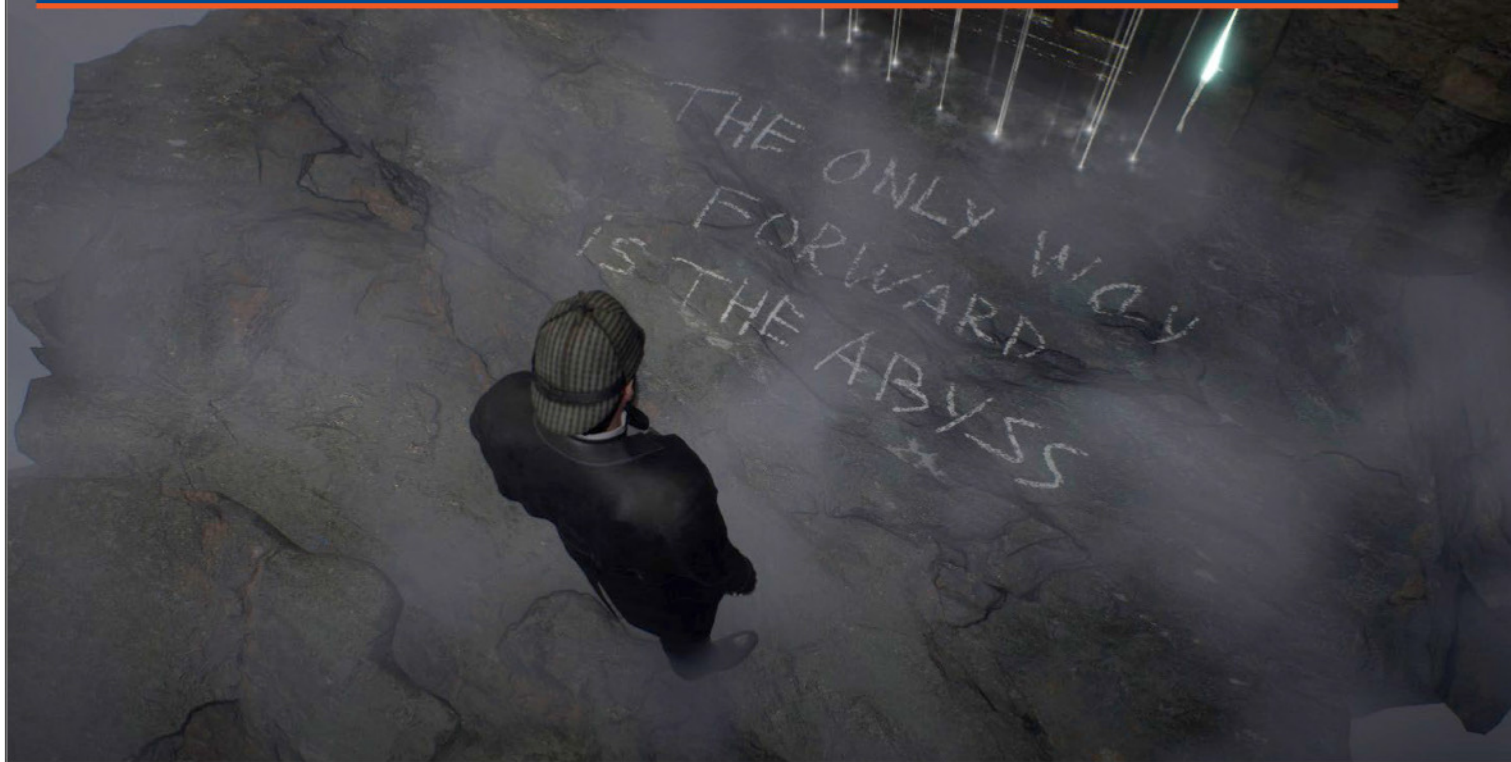


TOTAL
£5,906

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 9950X3D AMD £480 The Ryzen 9950X3D has more cores, but it's currently nearly double the price. For gaming? This chip makes much more sense.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,090 The RTX 5090 price is ludicrous, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £164 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 You could always go for 64 GB if you really want to show off, but 32 GB of speedy DDR5 is still a sweet spot.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £424 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £234 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £170 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V4 Pro Razer £170 The latest version of the DeathAdder isn't cheap, but when it comes to performance it's sensational.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Makes me feel more like I’m lost in Holmes’ mind palace”

Felt delightfully cosy and smug while playing **SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED**

Dampness and comic horror go hand in clammy hand. It’s bad enough coming to the slow and devastating realisation that you’re a meaningless speck in a vast, indifferent, and unfathomably alien universe. But doing it with damp shoes is so much worse. And while Frogwares’ other Lovecraftian tale, *The Sinking City*, surpasses *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* in terms of sheer overall moistness, this is a more thoughtfully paced and enjoyable game.

I’m lucky enough to be playing it on a night when wind and rain are battering my windows, much like they do in-game at 221B Baker Street. I was already sold on the presentation of *The Awakened* – gas lamps, crackling fires, a broad

MATT ELLIOTT



THIS MONTH
Lost his pocket watch while polishing the mantle.

ALSO PLAYED
Strange Horticulture, Escape the Backrooms, Phasmophobia

selection of equipable hats – but actual rain just makes it even more effective. It’s the sort of low-lift, just vibes game that’s best played by candlelight on a filthy night, ideally with food and drink that will give you gout; the pâté and port of Victorian police procedurals.

DAGON RATE

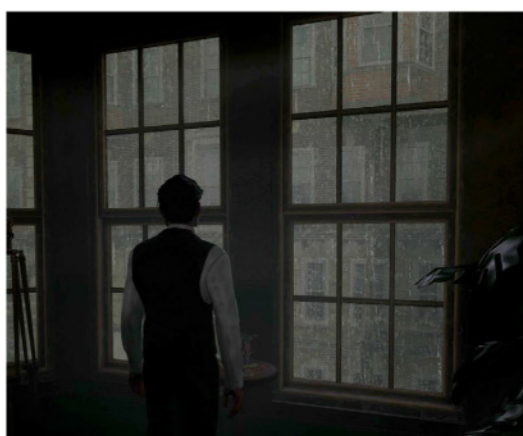
For some reason, Sherlock’s galaxy brain feels like an especially fine fit for this type of story, too. Lovecraft’s protagonists seem to fall into two camps: hapless idiots or probing

ABOVE: You need to work on your motivational quotes, Cthulhu.

scientists who delve too deeply. The fact that Sherlock is approaching this from a totally detached perspective feels like a refreshing change. It’s much more deftly handled than *The Sinking City*, which had you conversing with fish-men within the first five minutes, but never really allowed you to interrogate just how weird that would feel.

Systemically, it still feels like a strange game. I loved *Crimes and Punishments* because I could completely biff the deductive process and come to conclusions that were completely wrong. *The Awakened*, by comparison, makes me feel more like

THE SORT OF GAME BEST PLAYED BY CANDLELIGHT ON A FILTHY NIGHT



I'm lost in Holmes' mind palace. Perhaps not an intruder; more a cleaner who accidentally opened the wrong cupboard. I often feel like I'm brute forcing solutions without always understanding every single beat of a mystery. But as long as the juicy, coloured synapses link up, it really doesn't seem to matter. You'll still feel like a genius inspecting shirt cuffs and worn heels to build character profiles here, but it's nicely supplemented with some surrealist flourishes, such as some clues appearing in an ancient, indecipherable text.

I also like that there's no combat. The malign entities in a Lovecraft story should be cerebral in nature and largely impossible to fight. There may be some mundane exceptions – and, in this case, they involve shooting a suspicious orderly in the arse with a blowpipe – but the battles here are mostly internal. It makes for a more effective game. It's hard to maintain that existential dread when you're plugging rubbery monsters with a revolver. And on that note, you have to excuse me: my Stilton is starting to sweat, the rain is getting heavier, and I have a mystery to accidentally guess the answer to. If I'm still in the mind palace next week, send help. ■



“I’m dripping with gore”

SILENT HILL F is, so far, a violent treat

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Slowly lost his marbles while bludgeoning demonic puppets.

ALSO PLAYED
Skate, Hades II, Dishonored: Death of the Outsider

I creep forward through the fog, mud underfoot, as I tentatively search the plantations around my rural village for my friend, Shu Iwai. I really could do with finding him as, well, things have got a little sticky in Ebisugaoka as of late. One moment, I was just minding my own business as schoolgirl Hinako Shimizu, talking with my friends and having fun. But then the next moment, the entire village has been covered in fog, my friends have disappeared, I've been chased by a shadow doom monster through Ebisugaoka's streets, and I've had to brutally club to death a series of knife-wielding demonic flesh puppet monsters with a lead pipe. Worse still, I've not had a chance to pick up this month's issue of PC Gamer magazine.

So, here I am, in the foggy fields. Couldn't Shu have just stayed put in town? I mean, really, how hard is it to not just constantly keep appearing to me and then mysteriously disappearing again, like some sort of plane-jumping spectre? I might seriously consider downgrading him

from bestie to acquaintance after this foggy fiasco. Well, that's if I can avoid having a knife plunged into my chest by one of these demon flesh puppets.

MURDER SHE CLUBBED

I proceed down a path within the paddies, passing an abandoned building. I can hear Shu through the fog now, and feel I'm nearing my final destination, providing the slippery Shu doesn't suddenly disappear again. But the path peters out into a dead end, and I'm forced to turn around. As I do, though, another demon flesh puppet leaps onto the path and makes a beeline for me. Not to worry, though, for as I've learned during the first few hours of playing *Silent Hill F*, Hinako may look like a harmless Japanese schoolgirl, but in reality she is a beating-foes-to-death machine.

I grab my trusty lead pipe, which I've already used to bludgeon many foes to death with, and start clubbing. I repeatedly smash the demon flesh puppet while dodging its lunges until it drops down dead and I'm dripping with gore. I proceed on through the fields, and more uber violence ensues. I think I'm going to need counselling after playing this game. ■



“Death Stranding, but you’re a shapeshifting buggy made of Lego”

Create shoddy rovers or racing cars to build a blossoming outpost in **MARS FIRST LOGISTICS**

Things start off rather simply in *Mars First Logistics*: take control of your rover to pick up a ladder and deliver it to an outpost. Then, you’ll be delivering a crate of oranges, a paint can, and other basic items. The rover blueprints you’re provided with do the job, and it’s fairly obvious how they work.

Soon, I was attempting to haul a metal beam across rather hilly terrain to a construction site, but the default rovers wouldn’t cut it; the beam was too low on the ground and too long to get a good grip on. So, like any budding mechanic, I tweaked the designs, shifting the crane to the back of the rover and adding a joint so it could rotate, my idea being that I could lift the beam, spin and balance it on top of the body of my rover like a makeshift logging truck.

Of course, that’s not how it actually went. I couldn’t afford the pieces I needed this early in my career, so my rover was simply too short to place the beam on. With the beam wildly swinging around behind me instead, I quickly got caught in a

RORY NORRIS



THIS MONTH
Realised he’s not qualified to be an engineer.

ALSO PLAYED
Borderlands 4, Hollow Knight: Silksong

loop of doughnuts and toppled over. Using my mastery of physics, I returned to the task, deciding to haul the beam front-facing instead for a more balanced centre of gravity.

The next objective was even more of a puzzle, tasking me with carrying a large, awkwardly shaped telescope up a mountain to the construction site. With more money in the bank now, I extended my buggy and removed one of the right-side wheels to mount a long crane, in the hopes that I could once again pick up the package and rest it on my rover. This failed, but I did end up skewering the

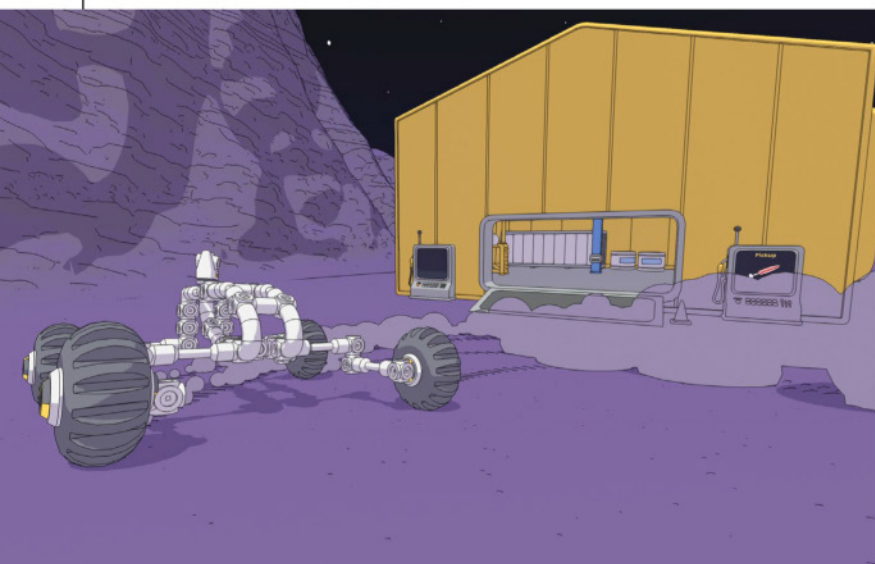
I QUICKLY GOT CAUGHT IN A LOOP OF DOUGHNUTS AND TOPPLED OVER

telescope enough to precariously drag it up the mountain.

MARTIAN MECHANIC

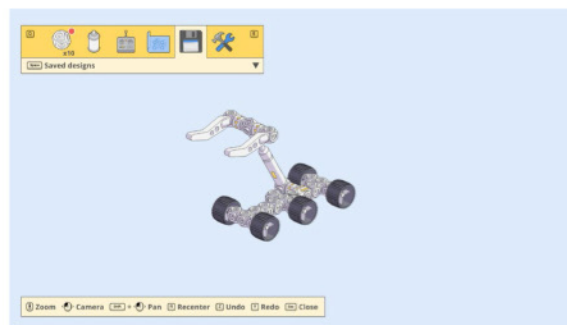
Once you build the observatory, *Mars First Logistics* opens up much more. You’ll have more main jobs, time-limited side deliveries, and a larger map to explore. With harsh terrain like fields of rocks or steep valleys and mountains, you need to plan your routes and design your vehicle accordingly. In a way, *Mars First Logistics* is *Death Stranding* but you’re a shapeshifting buggy made of Lego. Don’t worry, though, it’s nowhere near as harsh, as packages can be bashed about, and it’s never too late to fiddle with your equipment.

You’re presented with such simple challenges, like placing a box on top of a shelf, but it’s a genuinely fun puzzle to figure out how you can create a vehicle that can rise to the challenge with the funds you have. Of course, these challenges only get more complex, but so does your expertise. Soon you’ll be building roads, mining, or maybe just goofing around with a suspiciously phallic rover. Oh, and you can do it all alone or alongside wannabe mechanics. ■



LEFT: Here’s my trusty rover dragging a valuable telescope through the sand. If it works, it works.

BELOW: You can build your rover brick by brick, unlocking more pieces as you go.





“I travelled all over the Caribbean hunting for the scoundrel”

On the trail of the man who betrayed my family in **SID MEIER'S PIRATES!**

Let me tell you, stranger, about the game I install on just about every gaming PC I use, whether it's so powerful it dims the lights when I switch it on or whether it's getting by on integrated graphics. It's the 2004 remake of *Sid Meier's Pirates!*.

You see, when I was a child my family owed money to an evil Spanish nobleman, the Marquis de la Montalbán. He betrayed my father the day before that debt was due, dragging him away into servitude. I escaped, and swore a terrible revenge. Later, I travelled to the Caribbean under the flag of the English, mortal enemies of the Spanish, led a mutiny against an abusive captain, and took his ship.

From there, I sailed from Florida to Trinidad, a letter of marque from the governor of Barbados giving me license to sink Spanish ships. I picked up a crew in a tavern, promising them adventure, food, and a chance to share in whatever treasure we found, and went hunting.

▶ IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Enjoyed sun, sea and skirmishes.

ALSO PLAYED
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered, *Townscaper*

DEATHSLOOP

It wasn't long before I had captured and sunk many Spanish ships, and had received promotions from the English, along with an estate in Barbados and an introduction to the governor's beautiful daughter. My nimble sloop, the *Revenge*, was upgraded to fire farther and carry more crew, and fairly bristled with cannon taken from enemy ships. I had gold in my coffers and a treasure map with which I hoped to uncover even more. Life was good.

TOP: Arrrr!

Still, though, the dastardly Marquis de la Montalbán preyed on my mind. I travelled all over the Caribbean hunting for the scoundrel, the blue waters, verdant jungles and occasional storms filling my heart with joy even though my thoughts were dark. Dolphins played around the stern of my ship as I escorted a new French governor to his post, something that pleased his king so much I was promoted to Major. Later, I captured one of his treasure ships and added it to my fleet, using the increased cargo space to trade sugar between various trading posts.

After that, my crew became discontented, and chose to disband with a share of the treasure we had accumulated, leaving me with my flagship and some gold to start again. I never did track down the Marquis de la Montalbán. He's still out there. I can feel it.

And that's how I came to be speaking to you in this tavern, stranger. Now, would you like a ruby ring to impress the ladies? Yours for just 800 gold pieces. Though I see you only have 313. Shame. ■

DOLPHINS PLAYED AROUND THE STERN OF MY SHIP AS I ESCORTED A NEW GOVERNOR

PEAK

Climbing with your friends just got more stressful. *By Kara Phillips*

As if co-op climbing simulator *Peak* needed more ways to be so stressful, the Mesa update is here to make you really re-evaluate your decision to play. The new landscape isn't the only thing you'll have to master the art of. Between tornados and sand dunes, the Mesa also tucks away a ton of secrets designed to make your life a lot harder.

This update slots a brand-new, desert biome to navigate in place of the Alpine. In the first week following its launch it replaced the Alpine environment entirely, giving players plenty of time to get to grips with what challenges it poses. But, now the dust has settled (literally) there's now a random chance it'll pop up each day. If you're struggling to scale the icy cliffs, this could be a blessing. But, if you don't know what to expect, stumbling across this sandy landscape for the first time can quickly bring your climb to an end.

Throughout your time in the Mesa, you'll need to take a lot into consideration and spend more time planning ahead than you probably have in any biome prior. For example, if you spend too long under the direct sunlight, your scout will start to take heat damage. Unless you've got a lot of suncream to hand, a new item also added as part of this update, spending time darting

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE August 11, 2025	DEVELOPER Aggro Crab/Landfall
PUBLISHER Aggro Crab/Landfall	LINK landfall.se/peak

around and hiding in shadows can really eat into your precious climbing time.

Luckily, this has all been taken into consideration and there are a few new items to make your life slightly easier. If you're lucky enough to find them in abandoned luggage or around the map, that is. If you take too much damage from the blazing sun, then Aloe Vera will remove this condition from your stamina bar.

You'll also find the Scout Cannon, a physical cannon you can climb into and fire yourself or your friends from if you need to clear open stretches as quickly as possible. An attempt to rectify the savage fall damage *Peak* boasts has arrived in the form of a Parasol and Balloons too. Simply equip these when you feel you're falling to your death and you'll start elegantly floating down. Be careful though, if you attach too many balloons at once, you'll start flying which definitely won't do you any good once they pop.

NEW RISKS, NEW REWARDS

All these items coincide with the ten new badges the game has received. If you're not racing to the finish, it's

worth trying out all these new goodies hiding away in case they could be the key to success. After all, the badges are named so vaguely you're hardly given any clues as to what you need to do. I mean, what could the Needlepoint badge entail? Maybe there's a part, or should I say plant, of the Mesa biome you really

THERE ARE A FEW NEW ITEMS TO MAKE YOUR LIFE SLIGHTLY EASIER

need to throw yourself into. If you know what I mean.

GENERAL THREAT

I wouldn't advise running around like a kid in a candy store though. Outside of the sun, the cacti and the general threat of your friends knocking you out and throwing you into a canyon, the Mesa has a few more dangers to consider. While you explore, you'll find a number of dips in the sand. There may be some tempting items to grab in the middle, or perhaps a poorly placed suitcase. But if you look carefully and see two black, curved talons sticking out of the sand, I wouldn't recommend venturing in yourself. Get too close, and a giant antlion will spring from the ground and pull you towards it. If your friends are anything like mine, they'll sacrifice you before they venture in for themselves.

If you're not a fan of anything vaguely resembling an insect though, the new arachnophobia mode will turn any of these multi-legged beasts, including the smaller scorpions roaming around the Mesa, into a different sized Bing Bong plushie. You won't be able to pick this up and take it to the top of the mountain, but it will at least cover the unsightly appearance with something more friendly. It won't filter out any of the bug-related noises though. You're on your own there. Good luck! ■

FILL YOUR POCKETS *More attempts to escape incoming damage*



BALLOONS
Float down for a limited time. Or, attach five to your friend and send them into the air.



PARASOL
Hop from a ledge and land on your feet, or stay in the shade under the sun.



SUNSCREEN
A quick fix to heat damage. Prolonged exposure requires a lot more though.



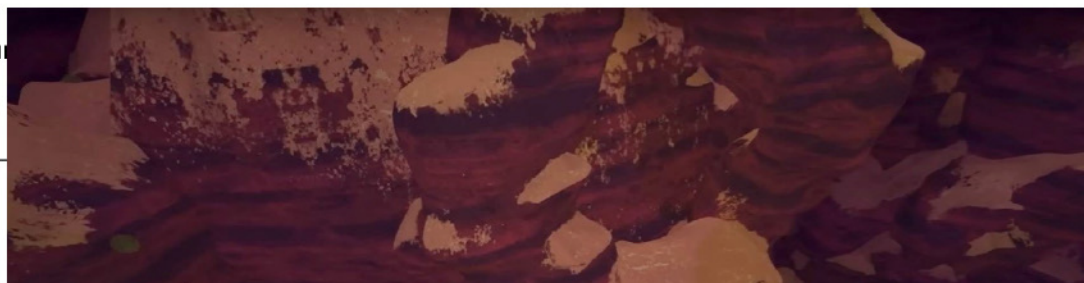
ALOE VERA
A temporary fix to heat damage in your stamina bar, but good luck finding it.



DYNAMITE
Throw it at your friends if you fancy. Be careful though, the blast is fatal.



CANNON
Launch your friends across unfathomable distances! What's not to love?



ABOVE: Talk about a leap of faith.



It's quite pretty when you don't walk into a cactus, the sunlight, or a scorpion.



HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Make the notoriously challenging platformer a bit easier. *By Christopher Livingston*

Hollow Knight: Silksong finally put an end to seven years of agony and speculation by abruptly existing. Isn't it nice when that happens? Team Cherry, the studio that refreshingly continues to do whatever the heck it wants, all but shadow-dropped *Silksong* back in September, suddenly going from almost no communication whatsoever to, "Hey, y'all, it'll be out in two weeks," much to the delight of fans of the original platformer.

Now that it's finally here, there's plenty of much-expected conversation around the game's difficulty – our review calls it a "Sisyphean exercise" but one that was absolutely "worth it". It probably won't come as a surprise to you, then, that most of the mods you're about to skim through make

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sept 4, 2025

DEVELOPER
Team Cherry

PUBLISHER
Team Cherry

LINK
store.steampowered.com

the game a bit easier. I'm not here to judge you or insist that you git gud! I firmly believe you should play every game exactly the way you want to. So, if you don't want to torture yourself for 30 hours or so of *Silksong*, read on for a few handy painkillers.

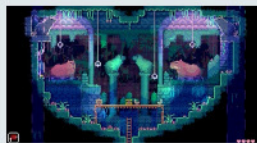
GET BUZZY

Right off the bat, one of the most popular mods for *Silksong* is a mod that was just as popular for the first *Hollow Knight*. The compass is a handy item in any game, and in both *Hollow Knights* it plops down an icon that pinpoints your place on the map screen. But it only does that



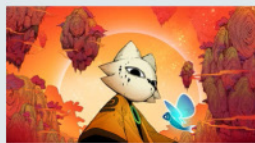
KNIGHT MOVES

Other great Metroidvanias to try



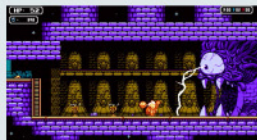
ANIMAL WELL

It's one of the best Metroidvanias of the decade, and it's all about puzzles and exploration.



NINE SOLS

Enjoy peak parry-based combat, a killer story, and boss fights to beat the band.



ASTALON: TEARS OF THE EARTH

This is a real standout with its gorgeous retro looks and its sprawling, maze-like design.

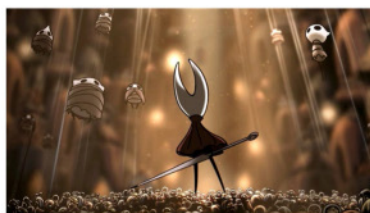


LA-MULANA

Are you a sicko who thinks *Silksong* is too easy? Make this your next Metroidvania... and good luck.



ABOVE: It's OK to make things a little easier on yourself. Play your way.



if you've got the compass equipped, and that means taking up a precious tool slot. Thanks to the *Always Have Compass Effect* mod created by Synthlight, you can get all the benefits of the compass, all the time, without having to take up a slot. In fact, you don't need the compass at all: the plugin will always show your place on the map screen. One less thing. The same modder has another mod that works similarly you might be interested in checking out: the *Always Have Magnet Effect* plugin will act like you've got the magnet slotted even when you don't, making picking up rosaries and shards much easier.

REBIRTH ANYWHERE

On to a mod that feels a bit weightier in terms of what it lets you do: the *Stakes of Marika* mod by kassent, subtitled *Rebirth Anywhere*. Yeah, that's a big deal. Instead of respawning at a bench nearby, by which I mean a bench absolutely nowhere nearby, when you die in a scene you restart right at the entrance to a scene. That'll definitely save you heaps of trouble, eh? The mod is even customisable: you can set your own respawn points by pressing F8, and pick up right where you left off. Just one warning if you use this mod: it may interfere with events that are scripted to happen during your corpse runs, and you may want to hold off on enabling it until you're sure you're just retreading the same path over and over again.

Here's another mod to spare you some heartache: the *No More 2 Damage Plus* mod by ryanfan175. In the original *Hollow Knight*, getting smacked so hard you lost more than one of your health masks were pretty rare, but that's not true in *Silksong*, where even in the opening hours you're going to be taking some double-damage hits. This mod ensures you'll never take more than a single mask's worth of damage in one hit. It won't make *Silksong* easy, not by any stretch of the imagination, but it sure makes boss fights a lot less punishing.

FOLLOW KNIGHTS

Not every *Silksong* mod is strictly about difficulty, some just dabble in it while accomplishing other goals: like turning it into a multiplayer game. Barely a week after *Silksong*

launched, there were not one but two multiplayer mods letting you pal around in-game. At the moment I'm writing this, the *SilklessCoop* mod by nek5 doesn't allow for true co-op: you and your friend won't be double-teaming bosses together and making short work of them. You can just invite another friendly hornet to hang out in your game while you play, which sounds like a great time to me. The other mod, called *Silksong Steam Multiplayer*, by 233xvx233, allows for basic PvP. I guess that would technically make *Silksong* harder, because not only do you have to battle bugs and bosses, but your own buddies.

Want to brush up on your boss fights without having to make your way through the game just to find them? Or have you beaten all the bosses already and want to revisit a



PRESTO: THE MOD LOADS YOU RIGHT INTO THE SCENE

few for some extra practice? Either way, the mod called *Godhome* by Cuckson (no comment) is an interesting one. With the mod installed, you can load up a menu listing all the bosses in the game, then select the one you want to get your ass kicked by. Presto: the mod loads you right into the scene and you can get in all the practice you need. The mod doesn't save progress, so think of these bouts as training sessions for your next runthrough. There's even a safe zone location you can choose that will let you tinker with your loadout or heal up for your next fight.

CONFIGURATION

To get these and other mods running (even just a week after launch, there were already several hundred mods to choose from), you'll want to head to Nexusmods and look for the BepInEx 5 with *Configuration Manager* mod, uploaded by devopsdinosaur, which provides the framework for all *Silksong* Mods. It includes a configuration manager that even lets you tinker with your mods while you're in the game. ■



GET STARTED IN

BATTLEFIELD 6

Load up on guns and bring your friends. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Best Battlefield 6 guns:
pcgamer.com/games/fps/battlefield-6-best-guns/

All dog tag locations:
pcgamer.com/games/fps/battlefield-6-dog-tag-locations-rewards/



TAGGED

1 It's worth noting that you can actually earn some skins and rewards by completing the campaign and finding all of the dog tag locations hidden throughout. These can be tricky to track, but the full list is included in the article linked on the left.



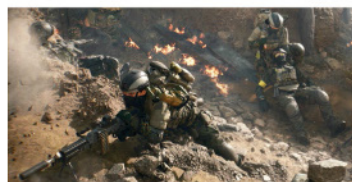
CLASS ACT

2 Assault specialises in aggressive plays, Engineer in destroying vehicles, Support can revive, heal and resupply, and Recon is all about spotting enemies. While you can play around with whoever you want, it's a good idea to specialise as soon as possible.



ASSAULT

3 Assault specialise in the assault rifle category, but they also get the assault sling, making them the only class that can carry two main long arms: an AR, and then a secondary weapon like a shotgun or a carbine. This makes them a great class for trying out different guns.



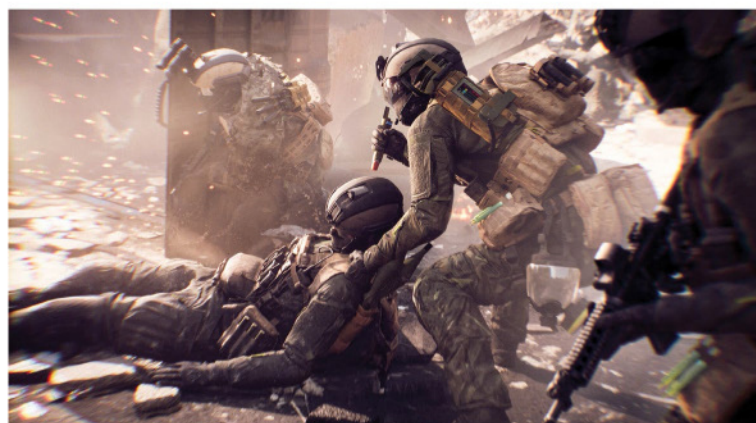
STEER CLEAR

4 It's also a good idea to avoid the first assault rifle, the M433, due to its lack of accuracy. You're better off using the SGX or the L110, the starter SMG or LMG, respectively. As long as you're playing an open weapons playlist, you'll be able to try them instead.



SIGNATURE

5 There are advantages to using specific weapons with each class. Assault gets a bonus to AR draw time, Engineer gets improved hip-fire control for SMGs, Support gets faster aim down sights and no sprint penalty for LMGs, while Recon gets reduced sway.



ASSIGNMENTS

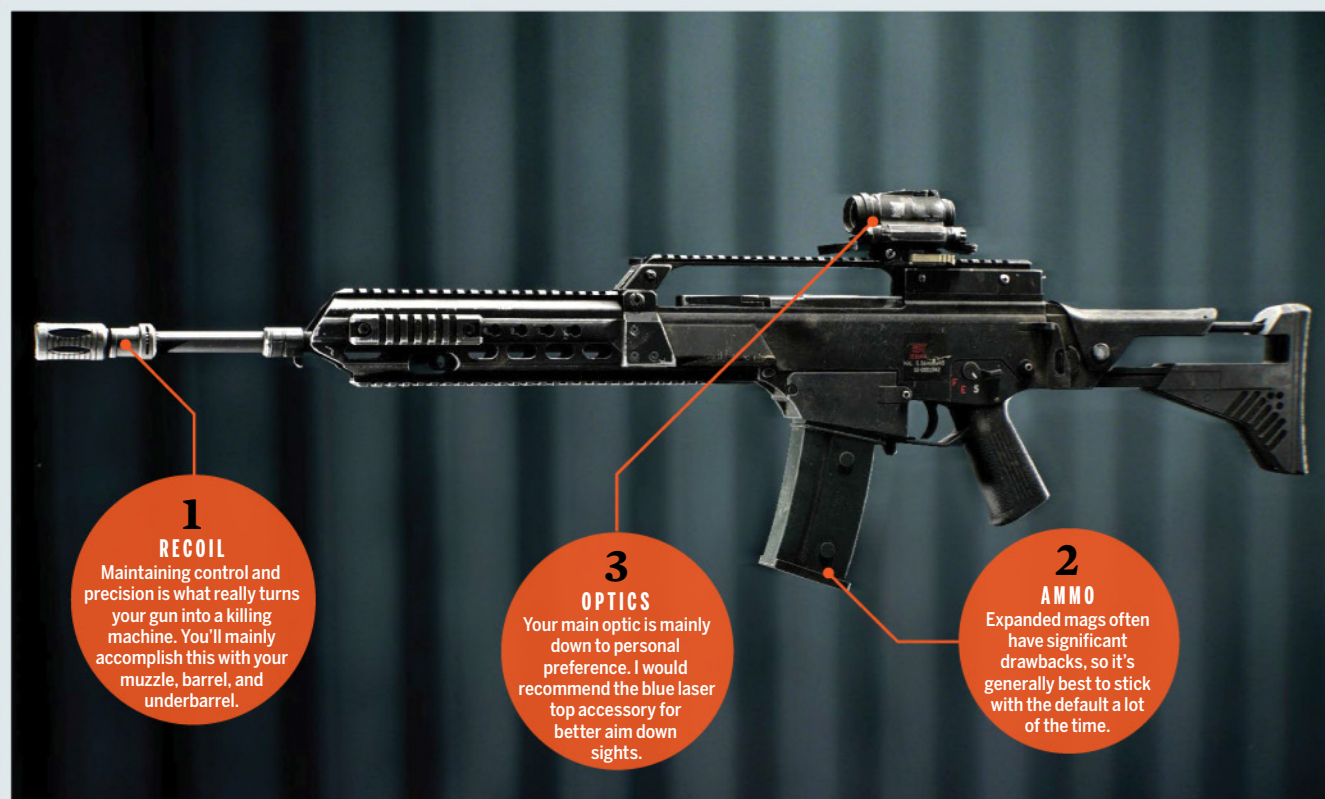
6 Sadly, if you want to unlock many of the new weapons for each class, gaining rank won't be enough: you'll have to complete assignments. These special tasks can be quite grindy, but you'll get new weapons and even skins at the end.



PORTAL

7 One way to speed up the grind a bit, though, is to use the Portal to find and create custom game modes that'll act as XP farms. If you cycle down to the community menu tab and then go up, you can search experiences for 'farm' and then hop into any number of XP farms.

LOCK 'N' LOAD *Build your best gun*



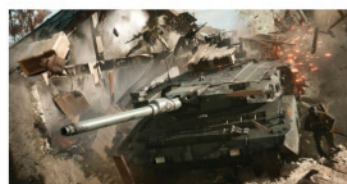
SMG SUPREMACY

8 If you want an initial weapon type to use, SMGs are very good. Despite the fact they're supposed to be close-range weapons, they are weirdly strong at medium range due to their excellent accuracy, making them a great choice for quick and controlled kills.



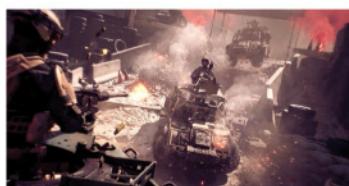
TAPPED OUT

9 Another tip to get more kills is to make sure you're using tap or burst fire at medium range to keep your recoil under control. For long-range weapons, like sniper rifles or DMRs, consider finding a spot to go prone, or attaching and deploying a bipod.



HIT THE GAS

10 Remember that you can always hop into a vehicle. Tanks especially are a great way of earning XP in modes like conquest provided you play cautiously and don't drive into a barrage of RPG shots. They are great for capturing points with only infantry and racking up kills.



EMPLACEMENTS

11 Hopping into emplacements like anti-air guns and missile launchers can be an excellent way of quickly taking down unsuspecting vehicles and just generally punching above your weight if you're not playing an Engineer or a class with anti-armour capabilities.



SQUAD GOALS

12 You can earn some of the most XP by playing in squads, setting objectives if you're the leader and either capturing or defending them. If you've got friends to squad-up with, even better, as you can hop into voice chat and enhance your communications.



THE ART OF
ILLUSION IN
**THE ELDER
SCROLLS IV:
OBLIVION
REMASTERED**

PART III

You just can't get the staff:
Crispin the Preposterous's
grand finale

By Matt Elliott

Like a rotten log reaching the rapids, Crispin the Preposterous has finally found some direction. After years (read: about three days) spent wandering Cyrodill, honing his craft of avoiding any and all conflict, he's finally found his life's purpose. He will take his rightful place at the Arcane University, craft spells worthy of his prodigious talents, and become known as the most recognisable illusionist in all of Tamriel; a goal made more challenging by the fact that he's invisible 90% of the time. The posters for his appearances are just blank parchment with a title treatment. He's John Cena is a velvet doublet.

When we left Crispin, he'd bravely stolen back all the missing parts of the Arcane University's missing Dwemer orrery. It wasn't motivated by any sense of academic purpose or altruism; it just mysteriously appeared in his quest log and sounded deliciously easy. When Crispin completed the quest in the last issue, he bagged a sweet 600 Septims but never actually saw the result. And, truthfully, I expected it to be low-key: an ornamental clockwork solar system that honestly wasn't worth the faff. The sort of thing you'd expect to find on the desk of some Dwemerphile middle-management Mages Guild nerd. The reality, however, is breathtaking: a gargantuan, mechanical cosmic map that spins stirringly overhead. It takes a lot to make Crispin the Preposterous, Tamriel's Greatest Illusionist, The Limpid Enigma, feel small. But somehow, this manages it. The finished orrery also confers a new power on our hero. But it's not an Illusion spell, so we won't be using it. Don't make me tap the rules.

THE RULES

1. Illusion only. Spells from any other class are forbidden.
2. No fighting whatsoever. And that includes unarmed combat.
3. No armour. You're an illusionist. Magic is your only protection.

CONSTELLATION PRIZE

The orrery is inspiring enough that Crispin is more determined than ever to win those recommendations, join the university, and get access to the kind of illusion spells that will make people question the fabric of reality. But there's a lot to do first. Last time, we spent literal hours running in circles being chased by dream minotaurs – which, if you missed that entry, is regrettably not a euphemism – so this time we need to

be efficient. I might even contemplate, to my eternal shame, some fast travel. We head back to Anvil, to a mission that Crispin does not remember agreeing to. It's the same feeling I get when I've agreed to go to a birthday party then forgotten it. Apparently, we need to help solve some mysterious deaths along the Gold Road, which sounds a suspiciously dangerous thing for Crispin to agree to. No matter. Getting the recommendation is key, and there's very little that's dangerous to a man who can disappear at will. Also: roads mean guards, so if anyone attacks me I can just run away. It's a spectacularly comic detective misadventure, in which

THERE'S VERY LITTLE THAT'S DANGEROUS TO A MAN WHO CAN DISAPPEAR AT WILL

Crispin pretends to be a merchant and almost immediately gets ambushed on the road by Caminalda, an obviously-evil, shark eyed rogue mage with a face that says 'I will ambush you on the road'. Luckily, I don't even need to wait for the guards. Crispin is flanked by a pair of Guild-approved Battlemages who are there to catch Caminalda. And by 'catch' I mean 'brutally kill while I turn invisible and flee'. This is about as easy as recommendations get. I loot her still-warm corpse, steal the stuff from her bedroom, and return to Bravil like the conquering transparent hero I am. I'm confident every recommendation will be this easy. I love it.

BLEAK EXPECTATIONS

To Skingrad next, where we meet the haughty Adrienne Berene. Adrienne, it seems, has lost one of her mages, which is rather careless. Erthor has gone missing and it's Crispin's job to track him down. This is slightly beneath The Breton Whom Visibility Forgot, but we'll do it anyway because it sounds simple and we have to. Some asking around reveals that Erthor has taken refuge in the nearby Bleak Flats Cave, which sounds like the title of a British working class neolithic sitcom. Crispin sashays

to the grotto, brimming with confidence. We'll simply use speechcraft to convince Erthor the Idiot Mage to come home. Except when we get there... the cave is full of deranged zombies. They're so stupid that Crispin doesn't even need to be invisible to sneak past, but there is, as so often is the case, a problem. Erthor is cowering in the bowels of Bleak Flats like the inveterate coward he is, and won't leave until all the zombies are gone. And Crispin doesn't have any way of getting rid of them.

There's good news, though. It turns out all Erthor needed was some motivation. He's too scared to go up and fight the zombies. But if I lead them all down to his hiding place, he suddenly finds his courage. Crispin is basically providing



» exposure therapy at no cost. I provide the moral support – invisibly and silently, from a safe distance – and Erthor does the fighting. And if he gets knocked out (which he does, quite often) we have a little rest and try again. After about 20 hours of shambling undeads, unconsciousness, and gentle encouragement, the cave is finally emptied and Erthor is free. It's likely he's suffered long-term psychological damage, but, more importantly, Crispin has his recommendation. Thank me later, Erthor.

WELL I NEVER

Next we head to Cheydinhal, where we meet Falcar: perhaps the first Mages Guild member yet who's actually a worse person than Crispin. His quest appears to be a nakedly obvious attempt to murder Crispin in a well. This presents a new problem for Crystalline Enigma: being invisible will not stop him from drowning. But if there's one thing we have loads of experience of, it's finding left-field solutions to annoying problems. Crispin needs to retrieve a ring from the body of Vidkun, the last apprentice to ask Falcar for a recommendation. Carrying the ring will obviously overburden Crispin and he'll die. So, instead, he immediately drops the ring, grabs it, and carries it in front of him, shielding him from its magical properties. Perhaps Frodo should have tried this. I return to the guild, triumphant, ready for a confrontation with Falcar, but he's even more cowardly than Crispin. He legged it while we were schlepping about in the well, which is typical: the one time we're ready for a fight, and our opponent has scarpered. Worse still, rifling through his drawers reveals him to be a necromancer. I'm not sure why necromancy is so much worse than just summoning undead creatures, but I do know that the only one Crispin has met tried to kill him. TL;DR: Necromancers = pricks.

There are two more recommendations left. The first, in Layawiin, is a largely unremarkable job in which we have to retrieve a magic amulet in order to ease the addled mind of guild leader, Dagail. The only notable mishap is that when Crispin ends up locked in a dungeon with Kalthar, a journeyman mage who's irritated that his fortunes are in the hands of someone who needs a special trinket to keep them sane. He has a point, if we're being honest, but he has to die nonetheless. And, unfortunately,

OPTICAL ILLUSIONIST

Can you spot the five differences?



Answers: Moustache lustriousness, scruffy doublet, fearless deportment, stolen alembic, steely gaze.

there's no peaceful way to resolve the conflict. We're locked in a room with him, the key doesn't spawn till he dies, and even if it did we can't pickpocket him. Worse still, Crispin doesn't even have a weapon. Luckily, we find a magic axe in the same chest as the amulet, but we have to bend the rules slightly to kill him. If it's any consolation, Crispin was invisible the entire time. Kalthar picked a fight with a shadow.

Finally, Crispin heads north to Bruma for his final recommendation. After zombies, betrayal, and almost drowning, this one seems adorably simple. We meet Jeanne Frasoric, another guild leader who has misplaced a mage. In this case, however, it's just a prank. The missing mage, J'skar, has just turned himself invisible. A kindred spirit. He won't reappear until Crispin steals a book from Jeanne. I could use a dispel scroll to break his spell and force him to reappear, but that feels like it's breaking some kind of code. You never make another illusionist appear. It's like using another barber's scissors. Problem solved, morals intact, final recommendation gained: we're off to the Arcane University.

There's very little pomp that comes with becoming a fully fledged member of the Mages Guild, but we did it. The main thing is that Crispin now has the ability to make his own Illusion spells which will a) be much more effective than the garbage most vendors sell, b) are much cheaper, and c) we get to name them, which is great. Our first creation is a maximum-effect Frenzy spell that will send everyone in a ten-foot radius completely berserk. I call it Crispin's Spasm. My plan is to walk into a room of enemies, pop the Spasm, then blink out of view while they murder each other. It can't fail.

UNDEAD NIGHTMARE

I'd say that there's one final thing to do before Crispin can really feel like a mage, but that's not true; he's always felt like one. But nevertheless, the first rite of passage after becoming a member of the guild is to make your own staff. Crispin actually likes the sound of this. It can be enchanted with a spell of his choice – from the Illusion school, obviously – so it'll be an easy, bonus way of being even





THERE'S LITTLE POMP THAT COMES WITH BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE MAGES GUILD

more of a menace. Plus, it'll look kind of awesome. Crispin knows the value of a stylish accessory.

True to the spirit of the game, we have to head to a nearby cave to find the special wood to make the staff. Once there, Crispin is to speak to Eletta or Zahrasha, who guard the sacred grove. In keeping with Crispin's adventure thus far, they're both dead and the cave is full of necromancers. Just when we thought we couldn't hate them any more, they turn up to make a simple task more complicated than it needs to be. The good news is that this is the excuse we needed to unleash Crispin's Spasm. He pops it off in the cave, and it's chaos. Necromancers attacking zombies. Zombies attacking necromancers. Zombies attacking zombies. I leave them to their cyclical violence and head outside to get the staff.

More necromancers. And the problem here is that the quest won't complete until they're all dead. Crispin Spasms them good and

transparently relaxes while they all murder each other. But, mathematically, this obviously can't work. There was always going to be one left. I'm determined to make up for the ignominy of the earlier fight with Kalthar, so we're doing this properly. Slowly, inevitably, invisibly, Crispin nudges the final necromancer to the blood-slicked precipice of a nearby cliff.

At last, the idiot necromancer goes tumbling to his death, never knowing the name of the elemental force that manoeuvred him to his doom: Crispin the Preposterous, The Human Window, He Who Shall Not Be Seen, The Optical Conundrum, The Gossamer Gamboler, El Vanisho, Sheer Magnificence. He is, utterly without question, Tamriel's Greatest Illusionist. ■

ABOVE: Note to self: screenshots of invisible NPCs are less interesting than you think.





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE ETHICS OF EATING FLESH, A QUEASY QUEST IN DREAD DELUSION

Plenty of RPGs bang on about choice and consequence – this delivers. *By Ted Litchfield*



LEFT: Prepping for a second Cadaver Crusade.



The indie RPG *Dread Delusion* is one of my favourite recent games, and I'd chalk that up to ambition. I'm not just talking about doing an *Elder Scrolls*-style open world with a small team, but how it grapples with capital-B capital-I Big Ideas.

It's smart sci-fi with a sense of history. The quests feel like short stories from the '70s, Harlan Ellison or Philip K Dick stuff – there's always a twist, something to really make you think. One that's stuck with me is called The Ethics of Eating Flesh.

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

The Ethics of Eating Flesh takes place in the Endless Realms, whose inhabitants were turned into zombies in the past by one of those freaky deities. They're immortal, but still decay, and they have a maddening hunger for human flesh that resulted in Cadaver Crusades before one of their wizards invented the flesh farm: vat-grown human meat. Tubs of skin, teeth and eyes like enormous teratomas, an Impossible Burger ethical human meat alternative.

There's one flesh farm you can visit in *Dread Delusion*, with the rest said to be underground. You can speak to their inventor, Penitent Thaw, but there's nothing to indicate a critical quest here, with only the curiosity of observing the product up close to serve as a hook.

"You are like me," it announces telepathically once you're close enough. "A living thing. Unlike the dried up husks who cannot hear me no matter how bitterly I scream. I am The Way of All Flesh. I have a simple

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 14, 2024

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

OUR REVIEW
73%

LINK
store.steampowered.com

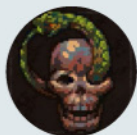
MORAL DILEMMAS

Some of Dread Delusion's other killer quests



A CASTLE, CURSED

Is easing one man's suffering worth risking a plague?



BELOW THE ENDLESS

A god offers an alternative to immortality.



MADNESS OF THE KING

We built a computer god, but he's bluescreening.



MISSING PERSONS

A secret government project to erase and clone citizens.



THE GOD HUNT

A reawoken god of endless fecundity offers an end to famine.



THE GOLDEN TYPHOS

Just a good ol' fashioned ghost story in a flying ship.

question for you. What is the meaning of life?"

This biomass became self-aware 100 years ago, and has understandable desires like "stop eating me", but it can only communicate with living things, not the Endless, and you're the first

BUT WHAT RIGHT DO WE HAVE TO SNUFF OUT A UNIQUE LIFEFORM?

"breather" to pay a visit. This presents a dilemma.

Thaw would like you to destroy the farm, eliminating evidence and preserving the status quo. The Way of All Flesh does not want to die, beseeching you, "Please, I did not choose to be a thinking being. It was not a choice I made. It is just what I am." Sparing it will deprive the Endless of food once the story

spreads, empowering a conservative element that wants to reignite the Cadaver Crusades.

ETHICS CLASS

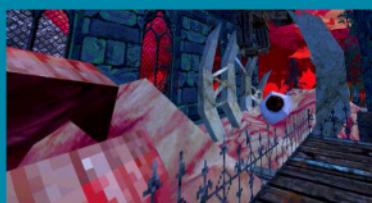
The surprise start of this quest and the fact that it can be missed already really gets me: one of my favourite things in RPGs is the unexpected rabbit hole, the major quest in disguise. Sanguine's The Hangover sendup in *Skyrim*, A Night to Remember, which begins in a bar, is a classic example.

But The Ethics of Eating Flesh sticks with me by presenting a genuinely vexing choice, something RPGs often promise, rarely deliver, and that *Dread Delusion* has in spades. Eliminating The Way of All Flesh is politically convenient, preserving human life from the predations of the Endless, and sparing the zombies from an inevitable reprisal.

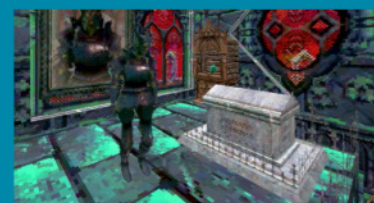
But what right do we have to snuff out a unique lifeform which has known nothing but pain and isolation? Further, Thaw can offer no assurance that this won't happen again – if it isn't already happening at all of the other farms.

Also, and not to get too woo-woo, I think this quest is an excellent example of sci-fi exploring a real social issue in a deferred manner. It's not polemical, and presents a fully contained story invested in its own fictional world, but when I replayed it for this article, I couldn't help but think about factory farming and the real-life ethics of eating flesh.

The Endless are able to justify their consumption because they are incapable of hearing the telepathic cries of the farm, but that doesn't change the fact that they are torturing a thinking, feeling thing. What similar nuances of thought or emotion are we incapable of recognising in farmed animals? This quest didn't make me a vegetarian, but it didn't hurt. ■



LEFT: I call it "Looooooooooooong Pork". It's delicious.





PREY

One of the most creatively ambitious FPS games of all time. *By Robert Jones*

Prey is a ridiculous game. Ridiculous in many ways, but mostly in terms of creative ambition. At its core, *Prey* is still an FPS, so you run forwards and sideways and, occasionally, backwards, while shooting stuff in the head. The shooting is good but not great. But surrounding that solid core is a game that drips with a level of ambition and creativity that few first-person shooter games have ever delivered, or even attempted to deliver. And it starts with the game's narrative setup, which immediately tells you that you're not in FPS Kansas any more.

You're Domasi 'Tommy' Tawodi, a former soldier with Cherokee Native American blood running through your veins, and all you want to do is

get off this god-damned reservation with your girlfriend, Jen, and start a new life away from your cultural heritage. Jen doesn't want to leave, though, and your grandfather, Enisi, who is the most Cherokee Native American of all time, is constantly bugging you to embrace your heritage and stay put. As Jen is explaining to you why she doesn't want to leave, though, serving drinks at the reservation's bar, she's hit on by a pair of drunk thugs, and the next thing you know, you're beating them to a pulp while Jen desperately pleads with you to stop. That's when the roof of the bar is dematerialised and aliens in a giant spaceship tractor-beam you all up.

BEAM ME UP, TOMMY

"Ah," you tell yourself, "that was pretty cool. Now to grab a gun and shoot aliens in corridors until you

rescue Enisi and Jen." But *Prey* has other, wilder ideas, starting with the bloody and brutal murder of Enisi, who, while constrained with hand and ankle cuffs, has his organs forcibly removed and his body mulched. Woah! Jen, also, is whisked off into the bowls of the spaceship, screaming for you to help her. There will be no quip-tastic fast action movie rescue here. And, indeed, if it wasn't for a mysterious character helping you yourself to get free from alien processing, then that would very much be that.

Freedom comes, though. And when I say freedom, I mean freedom

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2006

PUBLISHER
2K Games

DEVELOPER
Human Head Studios

LINK
tinyurl.com/3cxfbrjz



ABOVE: The alien spaceship is dauntingly huge, making you feel small and insignificant.

RIGHT: Tommy is shrunk to miniature size and pursued by angry aliens. Cue Yakety Sax.



The gunplay is good, not great.



to crash rapidly into *Prey*'s increasingly bonkers gameplay mechanics, one after another, at breakneck speed. Before you know it, you're flying through portals and solving puzzles that require the manipulation of portals. Think Valve's *Portal* gameplay, but streamlined. The portals don't just appear as oval tears in reality that are floating in mid-air, though, but they are also found in movable doorways and even boxes. It's remarkable to see in an FPS of this era, and

especially because *Prey* launched the year before *Portal*. Just when you get used to Tommy portaling hither and thither, though, *Prey* then throws its next cuckoo bananas mechanic at you – zero-G walkways. Power up these walkways in the alien ship, and before you know it, you're walking on walls and ceilings, looking down at the floor, which, just seconds before, you were standing on. Walkways snake around the ship, too, and just as you're trying not to barf up your lunch due to the disorientation,

PREY THEN THROWS ITS NEXT CUCKOO BANANAS MECHANIC AT YOU – ZERO-G WALKWAYS

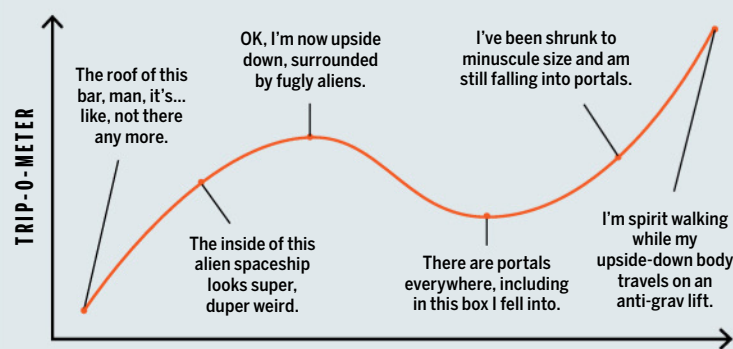
portals then open on the walkways, and you're suddenly fighting fugly aliens upside down on the ceiling.

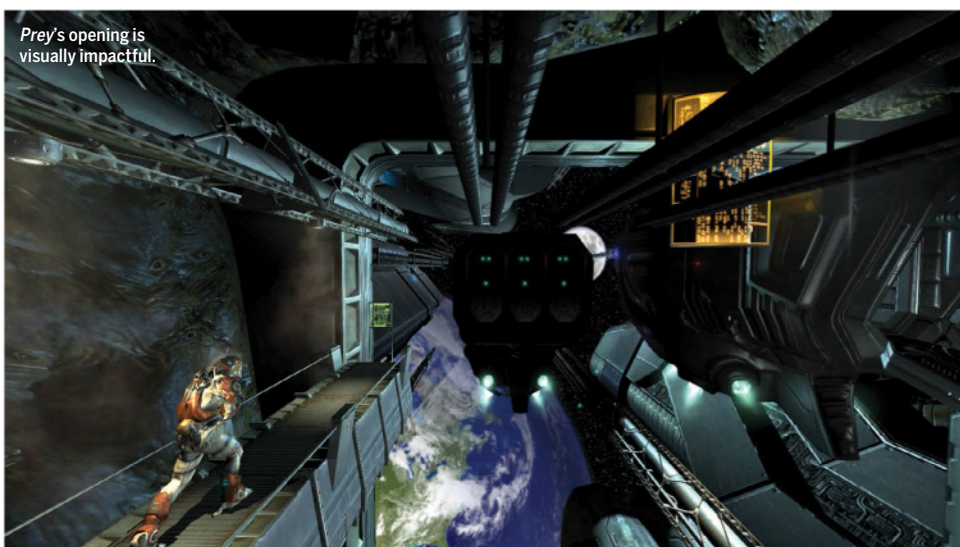
SHRINKFLATION

"This is all fine," you say to yourself, as you gun down aliens and dodge what look like genetically modified and augmented humans. How more trippy can *Prey* get? Hint: it gets a lot more trippy. As you're pushing around fleshy, organic egg-like sacks that are spewed forth from the alien ship, using them to blow open doors, as well as ducking under orifice-like vents that spew poisonous alien matter all over the place, you suddenly fall into a portal that transports you inside a small see-through box in the middle of a room, with you emerging, shrunk to miniature size, within the box. The box is filled with a small circular planetoid rock, which is suspended in mid-air. Naturally, it is at this point that more miniature portals open on the planetoid, and you're forced to

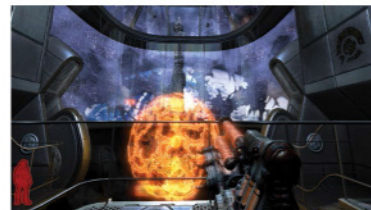
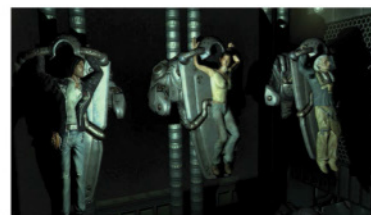
WTF-O-METER

Prey's opening hour sure is a trip



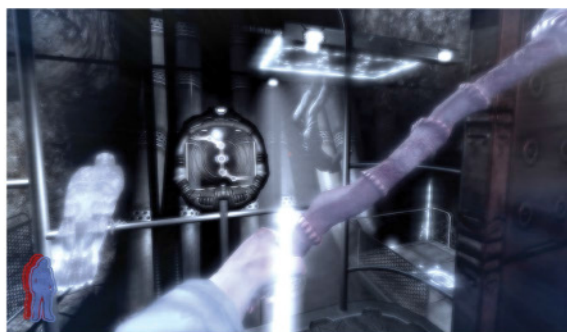
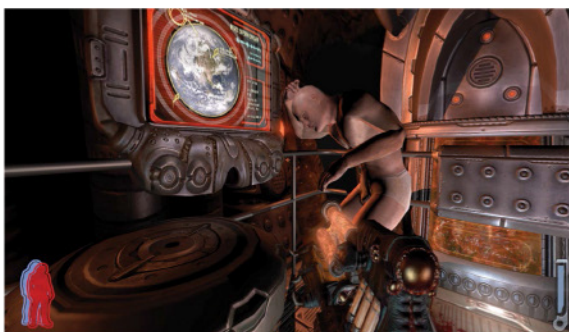


Prey's opening is visually impactful.



ABOVE: Tommy, Jen and Enisi after getting captured by aliens.

LEFT: Tommy spirit walking while his physical body is transported upside down on a moving lift.



run around the ball, which has its own gravitational field, while fighting more miniaturised aliens.

So that's the end of the madness, right? Wrong! After escaping back out of the box via another portal that returns you to regular size, Tommy finds himself in a fight to the death in the remains of the reservation's bar, which was beamed up by the aliens too. Tommy is victorious, but soon finds himself plummeting to his death as the elevator he is in is then shot to pieces by the aliens. But, as you would expect from a game as creatively ambitious as *Prey*, Tommy's plunge does not end with a game over, but instead the introduction of another loopy game mechanic – spirit walking.

Tommy awakes in the spirit world, and here is the deceased Enisi, in full-on spectral Obi-Wan Kenobi form, introducing the spirit walking mechanic. Due to his Native American heritage, Tommy can leave his physical body behind and spirit walk, with his spirit then capable of manipulating things in the physical world and even attacking foes with a spirit bow. After completing the simplest trial of all time to spirit walk through a wall of fire, Tommy's spirit is returned to his body aboard the

alien spaceship and invited to make use of his newfound ability. Moments later, Tommy is spirit-walking through force fields to turn them off, and attacking aliens from the spirit world with his spirit bow.

It doesn't end there, though, as before long Tommy is positioning his body on a zero-G walkway's moving platform, before leaving his body in spirit form to actuate the

platform's go button, to then watch his upside-down body trundle past on said platform, before then rejoining his body and proceeding to fight yet more aliens upside down, both with real alien guns and his own spirit bow. Quite frankly, it's a weird assault on the senses that, coming as it does all within the first few hours of playing the game, feels almost overwhelming.

And that's to say nothing of the bit where, during all this mechanical madness, you watch a demon spirit kill an abducted child, taking the child's form, and then watch the demon kill another abducted child by brutally impaling him, before then trying to kill you, too, with the spectral foe trying to murder you in spirit form. Honestly, you may need to go put the kettle on after playing the opening hours of *Prey*.

RAW SPIRIT

Prey is engaging, that's for sure. And I don't think that has ever really been in doubt. The same can be said for its technical production, which I feel really does stand the test of time. This is a good-looking game that, at the time, was a technical marvel and today still shines thanks to its strong art direction and raft of visual party

MEET DOMASI 'TOMMY' TAWODI

Prey's protagonist up close and personal

1 HERITAGE

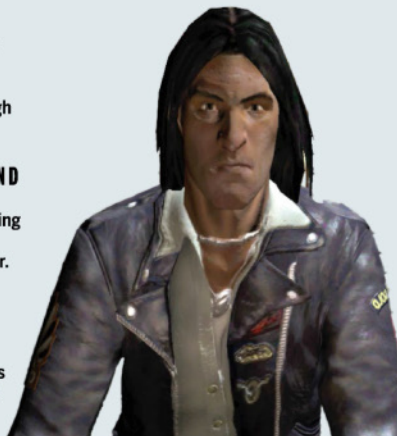
Tommy comes from a Cherokee Native American lineage, even though he rejects it.

2 BACKGROUND

Tommy is a former soldier, having fought for the US Army when younger.

3 DREAM

Tommy wants to leave the reservation with his girlfriend, Jen, and start a new life.





Back in 2006, *Prey*'s portal mechanics were jaw-droppingly novel.

tricks. Get *Prey* running today, and its impact in these areas is obvious. Maybe more obvious than ever, actually, when you compare it to some of the other FPS games released in 2006, such as *Black, Red Steel* and *Medal of Honor: Heroes*, which feel far more genre typical.

As you progress through the game, while the oddness of the mechanics dull, the plot continues to freewheel, and I think it's fair to say that Jen's fate, as well as that of the alien ship and Tommy, is not what you would expect. None of it is particularly original, cribbing here and there from a lot of popular 1990s sci-fi (I got Picard-era *Star Trek* movies a lot from it), but this amalgamation combines to maintain *Prey*'s weirdly alluring grip. Just when you think you're about to be out, *Prey* ambushes you with something weird and you find yourself back in.

Although on replay, I'm not sure *Prey*'s wild ambition actually did it any favours, with its out-there and different plot, non-typical cast of characters, and suite of technically impressive but almost overwhelming gameplay mechanics, leaving it a little lost in terms of the history of the genre and in terms of gamers' collective consciousness. In many

ON REPLAY, I'M NOT SURE PREY'S WILD AMBITION ACTUALLY DID IT ANY FAVOURS

ways, *Prey* is a cinematic, trippy, mature treat. But it also feels raw and a bit rough around the edges, with no part of the experience excelling, and no standout hook lingering in the memory. As I mentioned previously, the shooting in *Prey* is just good, for example, not great (this is no id Software FPS), and the puzzles, when they come, tend to be simple and quite dull. *Prey* may have introduced many PC gamers to portal tech in games, sure, but the puzzles it crafts with them, or the gameplay that comes out of them, is nowhere near as refined and fun as what Valve did with them a year later.

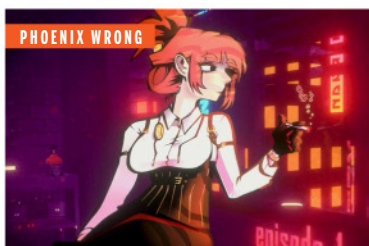
That said, though, in an era of modern FPS games today that, at least at the triple-A level, seem to steer increasingly away from single-player, cinematic, narrative-led, mechanically creative experiences, replaying a game like *Prey* feels fresh. There's still that element of creative, freewheeling, gaming industry

Wild West lingering in *Prey*, I think, which was evident throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. It feels like a game from a different era of the gaming industry, where there were fewer restrictions, for both good and bad, on what you could do when developing a major game. Maybe this is a contributing factor to why *Prey* famously had a long and troubled development.

I'm still not sure that tells the whole story of *Prey*, though. *Prey* sold well on release, with over a million sales registered within the first few months, and a sequel was even initiated in 2009 and carried forward for many years as well. However, by that point, the rights for *Prey* had transferred to a new owner, Bethesda, via its parent company, ZeniMax Media, and the sequel was cancelled due to it reportedly not meeting the new owner's expectations. As many PC gamers will know, Bethesda then went and used the *Prey* name to launch a totally unconnected new game, *Arkane's* – quite frankly superb – 2017 game of the same name. A factor that has led to the original 2006 *Prey* being abandoned. And, that was that. An unglamorous end to, maybe, the most creatively ambitious FPS game ever made. ■

JODY
MACGREGOR

My tastes have been drifting further and further away from the broader consensus over the last couple of years, but I choose to believe it's the children who are wrong.



OF THE DEVIL

nthcircle.itch.io/of-the-devil

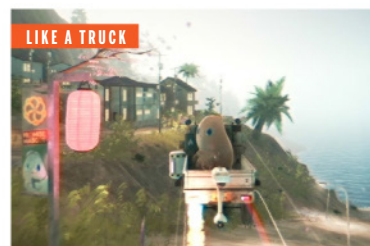
→ During cases in *Danganronpa* you shoot down lies with truth bullets. *Of the Devil* is kind of similar, only evidence you've gathered becomes a betting pool and your arguments are like poker hands and you're a cyberpunk *Ace Attorney*. The first case is available for free.



SPIRIT CITY: LOFI SESSIONS

mooncubegames.com

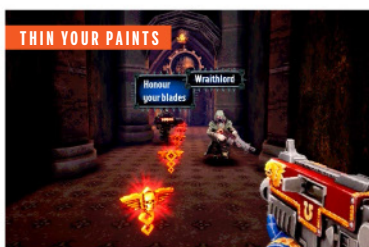
→ If gamification can make me less distractible, bring it on. *Spirit City* lets you design your own Lofi Girl or Synthwave Boy then sit them down to work in another tab while accumulating cute spirit pets. It's a productivity app where completing daily tasks earns you wee monsters.



PROMISE MASCOT AGENCY

kaizengameworks.com

→ You may have heard it's a light management sim, and you may have heard it's a visual novel with a *Yakuza* sidequest vibe. It's both those things, but it's also an open world collect-'em-up in which you blast an indestructible truck off cliffs, and that's the best part of the package.



BOLTGUN: WORDS OF VENGEANCE

aurochdigital.com

→ In a Tokyo arcade I once found a keyboard plugged in so you could play *Typing of the Dead*, hammering out English words to shoot zombies and gargoyles. *Words of Vengeance* is that only the words are Games Workshop-related phrases like ZEAL IS ITS OWN EXCUSE and NULN OIL.

MUST



PLAY

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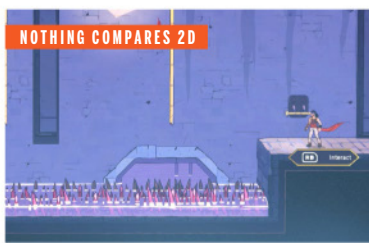
by Jody Macgregor



DAWN OF WAR DEFINITIVE EDITION

definitive-edition.dawnofwar.com

→ While I'm on a 40K tip, *Dawn of War* is still the best. The base campaign is hammy fun with models designed for bird's eye view trying to emote, but skip the linear *Winter Assault* for *Dark Crusade*, which has a paint-the-map campaign that's the peak of the entire RTS genre.



THE ROGUE PRINCE OF PERSIA

therogueprinceofpersia.com

→ I never got on with *Prince of Persia* in 3D. Going back to 2D was a great idea, except the first time they did was a *Metroidvania* – another genre I'm grouchy about. This one's not. It's *Dead Cells* meets *Hades*. Finally there's a modern *Prince of Persia* for me to play around with.



FORGOTTEN REALMS: DEMON STONE

store.steampowered.com

→ I played *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* on PS2 back in the day and it probably gave me brain damage. That's the only explanation why I'm a sucker for this specific kind of fixed-camera hack-and-slash. *Demon Stone* is basically the same game with a D&D skin.



DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

ea.com/games/dragon-age

→ In trying to summarise the TTRPG *Daggerheart* my GM asked if anyone at the table had played *Veilguard*. Nobody else had, because the internet told them the writing was bad. The internet was wrong, *Veilguard* is good. It's *Dragon Age* with the edgelord sanded off.



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HEROES OF MIGHT AND MISERY

When two gaming dragons go to war, there can be only one winner



The **PC GAMING DRAGON** and **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** meet on the gaming battlefield.

The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** pauses, then attempts to power up its console, but the console immediately presents The Red Ring of Death while making a wheezing sound.

The **PC GAMING DRAGON** admires its own majesty, which is truly great, before powering up its state-of-the-art gaming rig loaded with AMD Ryzen 9 9950X3D processor and Nvidia GeForce RTX 5090 graphics card. It is ready to game in seconds.

The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** hits its console repeatedly in anger, all the while lamenting its terrible life choices. Eventually, the console sputters to life. The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** prepares to game.

The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** does not game. Instead, the console reports that a critical system update is mandated before it can be used. The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** waits 23 minutes and 17 seconds for the console to download and apply the update.

The **PC GAMING DRAGON**, celebrating its smart and savvy life choices, enjoys the finest gaming experiences



on offer today, immediately, with a consistent framerate of 120fps at a native 4K resolution and all in-game settings cranked up to god-tier.

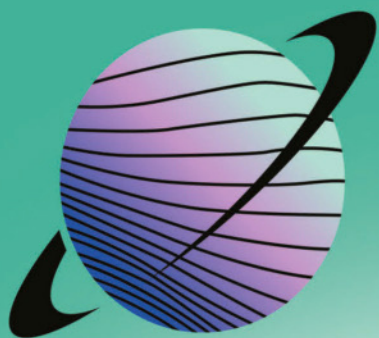
The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** is finally presented with the console's homescreen. It selects a game to play and weeps as the game struggles to run at 30fps with a dynamic resolution that frequently drops so low that the graphics appear as a blurry, ill-defined mess.

The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON**'s game is then forcibly interrupted by the head of the console maker's gaming division with a message that their entire console is already obsolete, and they now need the maker's new console, which has an X and Pro in the name. Also, the price of the **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON**'s game subscription pass, it is revealed, has just doubled overnight.

The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON**'s console then explodes, critically hitting the **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** for 999 points of damage. The **CONSOLE GAMING DRAGON** dies.

The **PC GAMING DRAGON**, sure in its everlasting supremacy and awesomeness, puts its feet up and reads PC Gamer magazine.

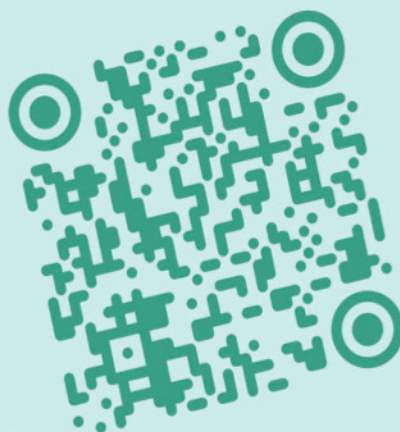
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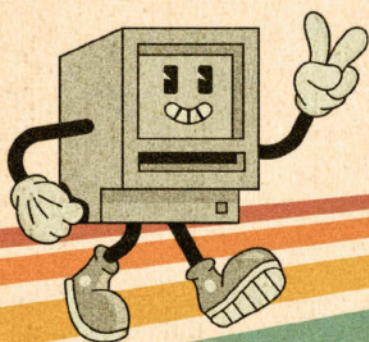


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